

Roundtable News

What Have We Learned 40 Years After *A Nation at Risk*?



At the Reagan Library, Roundtable members gather in front of the Boeing 707 that served as Air Force One for every White House occupant from President Nixon to the second President Bush.

In This Issue:

Roundtable Reflections	2
Robert H. Koff Award	2
Origin of <i>A Nation at Risk</i>	3
Learning from the Past to Look to the Future	4
40 Years of Testing & Accountability	5
Superintendents Speak	6
Remarkable Reagan Library	8

For those interested in school policy and the transformational effects of the seminal report *A Nation at Risk*, the Roundtable’s summer 2023 meeting was a feast for the mind.

2023 marks the 40th anniversary of the report’s release during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. To the Roundtable leadership, the anniversary provided a golden opportunity to reflect on what that report produced in succeeding decades and what the nation might learn from this experience as it looks ahead.

And, because the Roundtable last year visited the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, what better venue presented itself for thinking about these issues than the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley, California—the magnificent center commemorating the legacy of the president under whose administration the report had been developed?

During the course of this meeting, we had the advantage of being able to draw on the knowledge and experience of several significant resources. James Harvey, founding director of the Roundtable, had been involved as staff director of the National Commission on Excellence in Education that developed the report and served as one of the writers. Christopher Cross, a former Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, gave us the benefit of his 50 years of experience at the federal, state, and local levels. And Arizona State University’s Audrey Amrein-Beardsley laid out her research on 40 years of testing and accountability following the appearance of *A Nation at Risk*.

These formal presentations were rounded out by the presentation of the Robert H. Koff Memorial Award to *The Washington Post* journalist Valerie Strauss and a fascinating meeting-ending panel in which superintendents reflected on what they were seeing at the local level.

ROUNDTABLE REFLECTIONS

At the outset of the meeting, executive director Steve McCammon reviewed what was happening with and what was planned for the Roundtable in the coming year.

The state of the Roundtable is strong, he reported, with more than 90 members and the likelihood of additional growth. In fact, McCammon reported that nearly two-thirds of the Roundtable members are new since it transitioned to the Schlechty Center two years ago. He is thrilled to have so many active and excited members as we launch into 2023-2024.



Steve McCammon presents the state of the Roundtable.

It is likely, he said, that in 2024 the Roundtable will again convene a gathering during AASA’s annual conference on education, to be held February 15-17 in San Diego. In addition, the Roundtable is busy exploring exciting opportunities to visit the Equal Justice Initiative museum and memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, while also mounting a separate study mission to Ireland.

With respect to the Equal Justice Initiative museum and memorial, McCammon reported that the Schlechty Center’s Superintendents Leadership Network had been profoundly impressed by their visit to the center some years ago. Meanwhile, we have been in touch with the Department of Education in Dublin to explore the possibilities of their hosting a study mission on our behalf in the spring or late spring of 2024. Stay tuned on all three possibilities.

ROBERT H. KOFF AWARD

The Danforth Foundation’s Robert H. Koff was the visionary behind the establishment of the Roundtable. Following a distinguished academic career involving leadership roles at Stanford, Roosevelt University, and the State University of New York at Albany, he arrived at the Danforth Foundation with the insight that children needed the support of excellent schools with strong families and healthy communities. His vision became ours.

Valerie Strauss, the remarkable journalist at *The Washington Post*, has for 10 years used “The Answer Sheet” blog to help advance a vision of education and public services closely akin to Koff’s. In accepting the award as its fifth recipient, Strauss noted how proud she was to receive it and how impressed she has been with the Roundtable’s contributions to the public discussion about public education over the years.



Steve McCammon (left) and James Harvey (right) congratulate Valerie Strauss on receipt of the Koff Award.

ORIGIN OF *A NATION AT RISK*

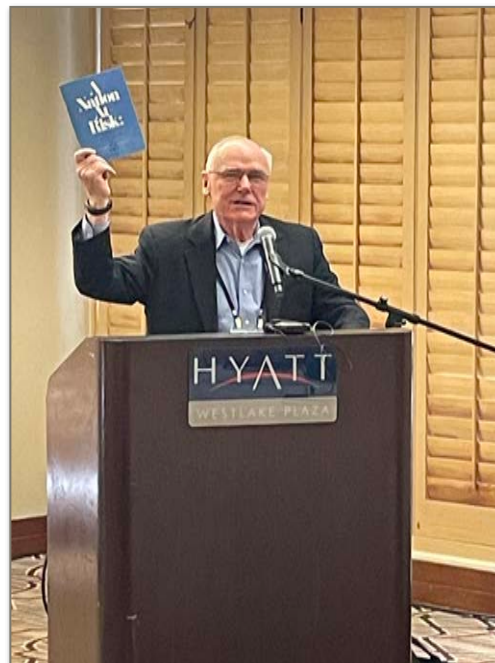
Speaking on the opening night of the meeting at a local hotel, James Harvey (r) said the Excellence Commission was the brainchild of Terrel H. Bell, appointed as Secretary of Education by President Reagan with a mandate to eliminate this department. Reluctant to do so, Bell created the commission as a holding action to give himself time to work out how to proceed.

The 18-member commission had its first meeting with President Reagan in October 1981, and was afforded three opportunities to have the White House publicize its report when *A Nation at Risk* was presented to the president 18 months later.

Harvey reported that two academic luminaries, Gerald Holton, a physicist from Harvard, and Glenn T. Seaborg, a Berkeley chemist who had helped identify and synthesize the last 10 elements of the periodic table, dominated the report writing process. They were, said Harvey, “masters of the universe” who arrived on the commission determined to issue a report describing American schools as failures. But in justifying these views, the commission ignored expert testimony it received that condemned international comparisons of student achievement (as “comparing the incomparable”) and that pointed to the destitution, inequitable funding, and racial isolation under which so many American students labored. The commission “cooked the books” to reach its pre-ordained conclusions, said Harvey. The commission never dealt with the reality that according to domestic and international research, somewhere between 70 and 80% of differences in average tested achievement can be accounted for in the United States by out-of-school factors such as student poverty, segregation, lack of access to health care, homelessness, and inaccessible employment opportunities.

The view dominating *A Nation at Risk*—taking school failure as an article of faith—directly contradicted the conclusions of a 1978 conference bringing together 400 educators and policymakers, a conference that concluded “this country has every reason to be proud of its schools,” and that “there should not be, under any circumstances, a national achievement test.”

At that 1978 conference, then-Senator Claiborne Pell (D.-RI) asked for a show of hands to test the waters for support of his proposal for a national achievement test of the basic



James Harvey holds up a copy of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, as he references it during the opening presentation for the symposium.

skills. Just two hands went up, reported Harvey, who had helped set up the conference and attended all of its sessions.

But today, said Harvey, “We have not one national test, but many. It is estimated that every public-school student in the United States takes 112 standardized tests between kindergarten and grade 12.” He described this as “a truly monstrous waste of time, energy, and money. It is thought that states spend nearly \$2 billion annually on standardized tests.” Meanwhile, eight tax cuts since 1980 have “looted the public treasury” and created growing inequality and a situation in which the top 1% of all income earners now take in about 21% of all income.

Be of good cheer in the face of these challenges, urged Harvey. “We have to be optimistic about the future even in the face of the challenges we face today.” He encouraged educators to push back against the meme of school failure, using Roundtable research to do so. Also, he argued that educators must push for a “broader and bolder” agenda to deal with out-of-school challenges to learning. Finally, “get a grip on the test-obsessed insanity of our policymakers.” Recent proposals call for testing every third year instead of every year since results scarcely change from year-to-year. (continued on p. 7)

**LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO
LOOK TO THE FUTURE**

Chris Cross (r) brought an impressive pedigree in education and public policy to our meeting, as described by Matt Montgomery, superintendent of Lake Forest Schools in Illinois. Among the highlights of Cross’s career



Member Matt Montgomery introduces our speaker, Christopher Cross.

and improvement in the U.S. Department of Education, as a member of the Maryland State Board of Education, including serving as president for three years, as director of education programs for the Business Roundtable, and as CEO of the Council for Basic Education.

He worked on education issues with a legendary Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Elliot Richardson, said Montgomery, and with Representative Albert Quie (R.-MN), ranking minority member of the House Committee on Education and Labor. In his free time, Chris served on numerous panels (including the National Commission on Time and Learning and on the Board of International Comparative Studies in Education of the National Research Council), while writing several books on the politics of education.

It was, therefore, no surprise that Cross delivered an outstanding lesson on the history of the federal role in education and a suggestion on how to move beyond where we are today.

The first U.S. Department of Education had been created in the 1860s under President Lincoln, he told us, but it lasted only a year or two and then was folded into the Interior Department, where education issues languished until 1953 when the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was established. “As you can imagine,” said Cross, “this was a very large, complex organization, responsible for Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, welfare, Head Start, and food stamps.”

When Jimmy Carter was running for president in 1976, he obtained the endorsement of the National Education Association by promising to create a cabinet-level Department of Education, but the administrative



Christopher Cross

modifications of his first years were taken up with creating a Department of Energy. It was only in the last two years of his term that he turned to the establishment of an education department, Cross told us.

While that was an easy sell in the Senate, where the proposal sailed through, it ran into tough sledding in the House, where united Republican opposition joined with Democratic opposition led by Leo Ryan from California. Carter’s bill died in the House on the first go around. But then, tragically, Ryan was murdered in Guyana while leading a Congressional investigation into the “People’s Temple,” the Jonestown cult led by Jim Jones. Learning of the arrival of the Congressional delegation, Jones had his 900 followers and their children commit suicide by drinking cyanide-laced Kool-Aid while his gunmen killed Ryan and three others at their landing strip. With the heart of the Democratic opposition silenced, the bill limped through the House committee process and passed on the House floor by a few votes.

Terrel Bell arrived at the department with instructions from the White House to abolish it. But, a brilliant strategist, Bell created the excellence commission, which produced *A Nation at Risk*—“Once that report came out, nobody ever said anything more about eliminating the Department of Education.” Bell had succeeded in giving education a prominent place in the administration, eliminating talk of doing away with (*continued on p. 7*)

40 YEARS OF TESTING & ACCOUNTABILITY

In introducing Audrey Amrein-Beadsley, Rebecca Jenkins, superintendent of Illinois' Libertyville School District 70, emphasized that anyone who appreciates the challenge of attaining tenure and a full professorship on a university campus will understand what an academic star Amrein-Beadsley is.

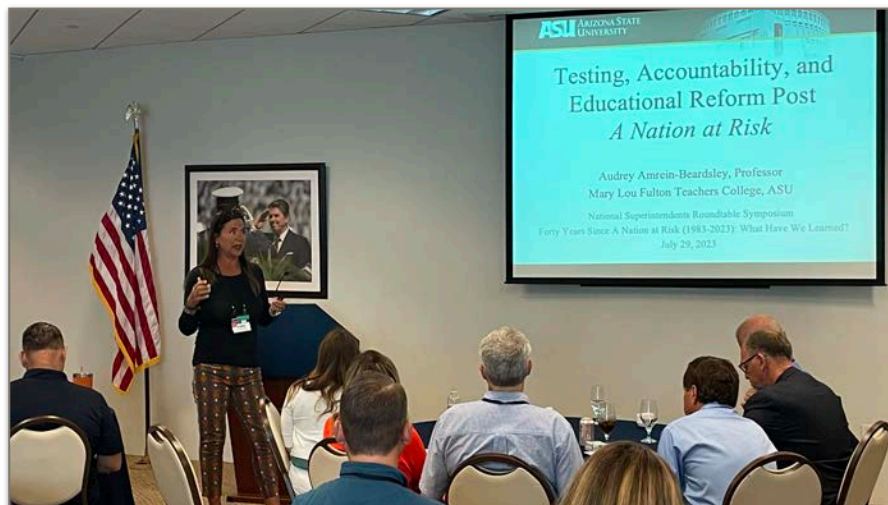
Amrein-Beadsley (r) received a Ph.D. two decades ago from Arizona State University (ASU), specializing in educational leadership and policy studies, with an emphasis on research methods. Eight years later, she was awarded tenure as an ASU Presidential Exemplar, and she was later promoted to a full professorship at Arizona State University.

Our speaker came to the Roundtable highly recommended as a specialist in educational measurement, testing, and value-added measurement. Best of all, said Jenkins, our speaker started her career as a math teacher at the middle and high school levels.

Amrein-Beadsley then launched into an academic *tour de force* outlining how testing has overwhelmed American schools in the 40 years since *A Nation at Risk*.

The historical background of all this began with the 1957 launching of Sputnik, which prompted alarm in the United States about the quality of science instruction in our schools. The introduction of minimum competency testing in Florida (1979) and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) completed the foundation on which today's widespread testing rests.

Phase I of the follow-up was represented by *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2001), which, based on a mythical "Houston miracle," encouraged high school graduation exams, annual reports, merit bonuses (and cuts), and teacher and administrator terminations. "Rewards and punishments were used to induce desired behaviors," said Amrein-Beadsley, based on a theory of change that holding states, districts, and schools accountable would lead to improved student achievement. The states that typically embraced NCLB were mainly located in the southwest and tended to allocate less money per pupil than the national average and paid teachers lower salaries.



Audrey Amrein-Beadsley

The preponderance of evidence indicates that the assumptions undergirding NCLB are (and continue to be) "flawed and misguided," she said. Student achievement has not improved significantly, and persistent achievement gaps "have not narrowed appreciably." Meanwhile, cheating, teaching to the test, constricting the curriculum, student expulsions, and teachers leaving the profession have all increased.

Next came the Obama administration's *Race to the Top* (2011), with its emphasis on adequate yearly progress and value-added measurement. Here the locus of accountability rested on the teacher with a requirement that states use test scores for teacher-level consequences, "including teacher evaluation, termination, and compensation." *Race to the Top* also excused states "for their failures" to meet NCLB's absurd 100% proficiency goal across multiple years of instruction in reading and mathematics for remarkably diverse student groups, including English-language learners and students with disabilities.

Race to the Top led to multiple lawsuits across states as teacher evaluation systems were challenged. The assumptions that high-stakes tests represented good measures of what teachers teach, or should teach, ignored the reality, and 80% or more of variation in test scores rested on out-of-school factors, said Amrein-Beadsley, citing 2014 research from the American Statistical Association.

Now we move on to the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), she noted, designed to reduce the federal footprint and restore local control.

But basically, she said, it replaces the national system of testing with state-led accountability (*continued on p. 7*)

SUPERINTENDENTS SPEAK



L to R: Steve McCammon leads a panel discussion of member superintendents. Tony Watlington, Theresa Rouse, Carmen Garcia, Gudiel Crosthwaite, and Don Haddad

After three intense substantive briefings starting the night before and a full tour of the Reagan Center, participants gathered for what turned out to be a fascinating panel of superintendents freely exploring the question, “What have we learned?” Spurred on by Roundtable executive director Steve McCammon, Tony Watlington (Philadelphia, PA), Theresa Rouse (Joliet, IL), Carmen Garcia (Morgan Hill, CA), Gudiel Crosthwaite (Lynwood, CA), and Don Haddad (Longmont, CO) took turns outlining what they had heard, what they were worried about, and how they hoped to proceed.

McCammon asked the panel to initially share their collective thoughts on the entire experience, to include the speakers, the library tour, and their conversations throughout the symposium with colleagues. So without identification, this is what we heard from the thoughtful conversation:

- Let’s not go back to normal. COVID gives us a chance to change. No matter what comes in front of you, you can learn from it. It’s all good. I had a teacher who wanted to kill his wife a week before school started. We had multi-generational homes (grandparents, parents, aunts, and kids), where the grandparents and children survived COVID, and no one in the middle did. In the midst of all that, we got a \$99.5 million bond passed to replace two junior high schools built in the 1800s. So, despite the turmoil, there are exciting things in front of us. Let’s keep moving things forward.
- I’m from an immigrant family, one of 10 children from Mexico. My grandfather, my father, and my uncles would come to California for six months and then slip back to Mexico. It wasn’t until 1984 that our family

could be united. Our parents couldn’t help their children with schoolwork. Writing essays? Struggling with Algebra? We had to rely on the schools for that, on caring adults in the system. They took care of me and my siblings. That’s it. Trusted adults in the classroom who don’t care where the children come from. That’s what we need. We know what works.

- Between 2007 when Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone and 2020 when the pandemic struck, we were unable to deliver a lesson to a child’s home. We were behind the curve on that, and with AI moving forward, the curve that’s coming at us will be exponential. And yet we’re still talking about issues, and processes, and how we feel, while the world is getting ready to race past us as our system is getting ready to become obsolete. We got a mulligan from 2007. I don’t think we’ll get another. As Eric Hoffer noted, “In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”
- One of the things that resonates with me is this whole notion of the glass half empty and half full. How do we motivate people? We have a lot of challenges in our city, but we also have one of the best high schools in the country. Schools are an historically underfunded ministry. We have difficulties with the state legislature. In spite of these challenges, we have to move forward and we have to inspire people to work together.
- Quite honestly, being here in the Reagan Library has triggered me. I lived through Reagan’s policies here and the narrative shifted under him. Until 1973, California schools were doing well. We didn’t have to sell chocolates to make ends meet. We had migrants coming from Oklahoma looking for opportunity and hoping to find work to meet their dreams. Unfortunately, they’re arriving today to a different reality.

Let’s leave the last word to Theresa Rouse: “We have different opinions in this room. There are different political views in this room. In every room, we have to be able to set these things aside. Here’s my core belief: If we can get people talking about what children need, we can address the divisiveness.”

ORIGIN OF A NATION AT RISK, CONTINUED

His major point: “We’re not helpless in this situation. There’s a lot we can do to correct the public record.”

Harvey concluded by quoting the Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet William Butler Yeats:

I, being poor, have only my dreams/I have spread my dreams under your feet/Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.

Every year, “About 25 million poor children enroll in our public schools. They spread their dreams under our feet. Our task is to respect those dreams, tread softly on them, and help the students attain them.”

“If we can do that,” he said, “we will be doing our part to ensure that this nation, far from being at risk, is living up to its best and most generous instincts.”

Video of the speech can be found here:

<https://tinyurl.com/jharvey23>

40 YEARS OF TESTING & ACCOUNTABILITY, CONTINUED

systems using the same theories of change that have already failed with *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*.

We need to “blow up” these approaches, argued Amrein-Beardsley, urging the development of multiple measures of student learning that are “democratically and empirically owned and developed.”

Campbell’s law comes into play in all of this, she said. In 1975, sociologist and political scientist Donald Campbell declared that, “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.” If one holds up a “social indicator like test scores as the most important outcome,” said Amrein-Beardsley, “both the scores and the people who use them will be corrupted.”

LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO LOOK TO THE FUTURE, CONTINUED

the department and establishing what was important to him, a sense that education deserved a prominent place in the life of the country.

After the report, the department created the “Wall Chart,” which compared every state on its educational performance related to resources and population characteristics, the first of many efforts over the years to create an accountability system for public education.

As we look at the increasing polarization around education issues in this country, including school board challenges and the banning of books, said Cross, “I think we need a new commission with some prestige to step back and look at our schools, including issues such as COVID loss, the achievement gap, local control, declining enrollments, the development of alternatives to public schools, measures of quality outcomes, and the assault on liberal arts at the collegiate level.



Attentive Roundtable members take in the presentation.

Cross’s suggestion for a new commission won wide agreement from the Roundtable, with discussion revolving around a similar commission in operation in Colorado, the need to find some middle ground between the left and the right, and the positive attitudes parents have toward their children’s schools. The need to get the right people involved with such a new commission while making sure it has an extended life beyond producing a report received a lot of attention, with the suggestion that something like the 1910 Flexner Report that revolutionized medical education was essential, funded not by the government but by something like the Carnegie Corporation with its reputation for integrity and independence.

REMARKABLE REAGAN LIBRARY



Roundtable members enjoy lunch beneath Air Force One.



Communication center on Air Force One.



The nose of Air Force One looking out over magnificent Santa Susana Mountains.



Replica of the Resolute Desk in the replica of the Oval Office at the museum.



Participants enjoy docent-led tours of the exhibits.

Steve McCammon, Executive Director
National Superintendents Roundtable
P.O. Box 6929, Louisville, KY 40206
steve@superintendentsforum.org
www.superintendentsforum.org