

School Failure as a State of Exception

by Robbie McClintock

American public schools are failing, letting the country down and jeopardizing our national security. That is the fundamental message stated in the "introduction" to [U.S. Education Reform and National Security](#) and developed throughout the report. It perceives education and schooling as a problem of categorical failure. Historically education gave opportunity to all Americans. "Today. . . elementary and secondary (K-12) schools are failing to provide the promised opportunity. . . . *In short, America's failure to educate is affecting its national security.*"

Over the past few decades, power-speak has put itself into a bind. It has so demonized the work of government and collective action that it has to envision extreme crises in order to justify the mobilization of public effort. Eschewing power-speak, reasonable people do not need to declare the public schools a failure in order to want to improve them greatly. And steady work to improve public schooling, without thoughtless panic induced by threatening crises, is surely feasible and important. But power-speak needs crises as a prelude to powerful action, swinging from an affable *laissez-aller* to a rhetoric of command in the midst of crisis.

But watch out! Crisis driven command presumes unchecked power, an exception from normal constraints and procedures. Power-speak has a proclivity for crisis so that it can gain command without constraint. A perception of crisis creates a state of exception, which legitimates the thoughtless use of excessive power. States of exception suspend business as usual and institute extraordinary procedures to cope with the crisis. Code Red! Power-speak has grown far too fond of crises and the states of exception they bring. It invites rash leadership and hubris. Power-speak pronounces a crisis; clamors to meet it, mobilizing all-hands in unchecked effort; but then, the fog of war beginning to clear, all look about, saddened by lives lost, poorer for resources squandered, shamed by stupidity, bewildered that the threat of mass destruction had not proved real at all. Even if chastened, the crisis-driven entanglements still remain, and new relations of power with them. *Déjà vu?* Perhaps it behooves us to examine closely the report proclaiming that the American public schooling has failed, creating a crisis of national security.

Of course, alert readers will recognize that Task Force No. 68 comes late to proclaiming the failure of public schooling. For several decades, the so-called movement for education reform has pushed itself forward by asserting that the public schools have failed. Therefore new leadership must try new kinds of schools, standards, and assessments. Traditional educators failed; let them step aside so that new leaders with real experience in business, government, and philanthropy can take command. Open the system to school choice. Mandate a core curriculum with tough standards. Winnow the art of teaching down to proven, evidence-based techniques. Upgrade teachers through rigorous training, incentive pay, and managerial discipline informed by hard data on each

teacher's value-added score. Subject performance by all—students, teachers, and administrators—to rigorous, comprehensive accountability through the constant testing of student outcomes achieved. *Pity the child!*

In structure, the introduction to the report is concise and clear. It has two brief parts. The first announces the failure of public schooling and shows three ways the failure affects national security. The second sketches the goals of Task Force and states briefly TF68's "three overarching policy recommendations" to correct the failures. Two reprise staple nostrums of the education reform movement and one calls for a bizarre "national security readiness audit" of American schools. We can leave the goals and recommendations for later postings. Here let us consider the doctrine of school failure driving it all. How does power-speak find public schooling such a threatening failure, a national crisis legitimating education reform, a radical restructuring of the American system of public schooling.

TF68 introduces its report by describing how public schooling has failed in several basic ways and then expands on each kind of failure in its subsequent sections of the consensus report (pp. 3-59). TF68 uses the words "fail, failing, or failure" frequently—43 times in all. Further, it finds virtually nothing in the existing pedagogical situation to recognize as worthy or sound—"high quality" appears eight times, once to recognize it, seven times to state what is lacking, usually in teachers. In cataloging the situation, the report asserts the schools or their teachers are failures 23 times, and it attributes educational failure a bit more diffusely to the United States, to the various states & districts, or to an amorphous education-at-large nine more times. To complete the picture of failure, TF68 finds seven times that students in various situations fail and attributes the few remaining instances elsewhere, one to the economy and two to the national security agencies.

Readers will find TF68's recital of dismal failure in the public schools remarkably impersonal and abstract. A large, ominous cloud conjures up diffuse worries. "Educational failure puts the United States' future economic prosperity, global position, and physical safety at risk. Leaving large swaths of the population unprepared also threatens to divide Americans and undermine the country's cohesion, confidence, and ability to serve as a global leader." In its report, TF68 treats failure as it did inequality, as a binary condition, one of the consequences of seeing everything in the abstract. As people either have opportunity and promise, or they do not, the same holds for success and failure: schools either succeed or they fail. Power-speak avoids discussion of degrees. Power-speak shuns the complexities arising with the thought that a school might succeed with many of its students and fail with some of them, if success and failure are the proper terms at all.

Let us first put in question, not the unending importance of improving educational opportunities and practices for all, through schools and the whole of life, but the characterization of public schooling as a failed undertaking. Here we are not examining the evidence TF68 adduces about what is happening in the schools—there will be ample occasion to examine that in later postings. Questioning whether school failure is an appropriate or useful descriptor for the educational conditions the evidence describes does not at all alter the pedagogical situation or the data describing it. Contesting the idea of school failure, however, may change the perception of that situation significantly. A failed system gets replaced; an imperfect one gets improved. If instead of systemic

failure, one sees situations admitting of concrete improvements, parents, teachers, and the public can think about what to do more clearly. They can consider a wider range of options, one that may have more promise of actually improving the educational experience of real children as they deal with the actualities of their lives that the report offers.

TF68 purveys bogus nonsense in describing public schooling as a failure. Power-speak attributes the failure of public schooling to complicated particulars statistically bundled together, with the particularities abstracted away. Imagine TF68 applying its reasoning about the failure of schools and teachers to health care, to hospitals and doctors. Every hospital and every doctor has a significant proportion of their patients die while under their care. Would TF68 take this dismal reality as reason to declare the system of health an unmitigated failure?

We do not take the frequent death of medical patients as indicating the failure of modern medicine or the incompetence of every doctor. Nor do we take it as grounds for blaming the patients. The death of patients under medical care is reason to recognize that many cases are very difficult, that many diseases and traumas can be very hard to overcome, and that some constitutions and immune systems may have been weakened by complicated causalities not within the confident control of either doctor or patient. Medical failures consist in specific cases of *malpractice*, not in the limitations of all practice. And general limits on the practice are aggregates bringing together specific problems present in particular patients, who *present* in the medical sense, who manifest or exhibit a symptom or physical sign. Efforts to improve the general limitations need to start with these specifics that patients present.

Power-speak at work in the report of TF68 is not necessarily wrong in its educational concerns, but its interpretation that they signify a systemic failure of public schooling is blunt and dogmatic, and it leads to an ill-considered mentality of panic. The schools aren't working! Do something! Try anything! Power-speak should adopt the Hippocratic principle in thinking about education—Do no harm. To declare failure on encountering limitations will do harm, wreaking havoc in the profession without improving the educational process or results.

Why has power-speak gone to the extreme of declaring the limitations of the American system of public schooling to signify its failure? What is taking place creeps forward from the very title of TF68's report—"U.S. Education Reform and National Security." The report is not about American public schooling and national security. TF68 commits to replacing public schooling with education reform. The drumbeat of failure through public schooling is not about improving the educational experience of American children. It is an effort to declare that the failure of public schooling creates a state of exception. It suspends the old system of *public schooling* and substitutes a different system of *national schooling* in its place, serving not the public as a whole, but the separate corporate interests dominant in the American nation-state. Public schooling is far from perfect and there is much room for significant improvement in it, and in the educational character of the social context within which the fuller education of each American takes place. But that is not what the education reform movement is really all about. It is an effort, not to improve public schooling, but to change it fundamentally, which later postings will examine in detail.

Coming next, "Clueless—3" on education as social action, not crisis response.