



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

Arizona State University

ISSN 1094-5296

May 14, 2010

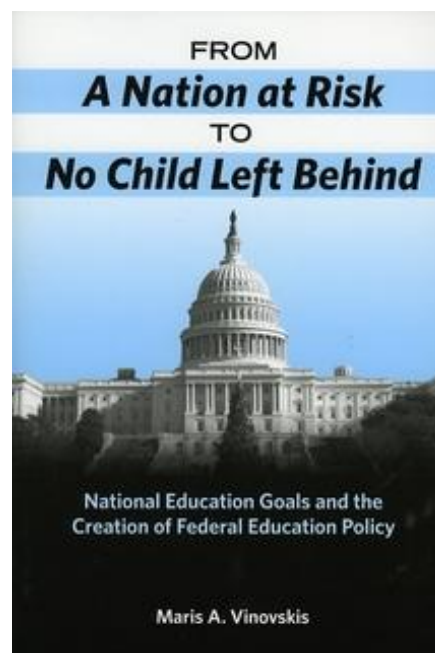
Vinovskis, Maris A. (2009) *From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind: National Education Goals and the Creation of Federal Education Policy*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Pp. 197 ISBN 978-0-8077-4922-7

Reviewed by Penelope M. Earley

George Mason University

From the introduction to this book, a reader who is not familiar with federal K-12 policy might be uncertain about the purpose of this history. Within two pages Vinovskis first describes *From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind* as focusing on "...federal K-12 compensatory education policies since the early 1980s, with particular emphasis on the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, as well as the establishment and implementation of the national education goals, the America 2000 initiative, Goals 2000, and NCLB" (p. 3) and a few paragraphs later he writes that it focuses, "...primarily on political and educational debates based in Washington, DC, over standards-based reforms and national education goals—something that has not received as much analysis as it deserves." (p. 4) In reality, it is substantially about the latter with



Citation: Earley, Penelope M. (2010 May 14) Review of *From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind* by Vinovskis, Maris A. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev921.pdf>

attention to compensatory education legislation, such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as a vehicle for federal conversations and policy actions related to national standards. With that in mind, this book captures and documents some illusive bits of history about an important but somewhat narrow slice of the education policy pie.

Vinovskis begins his history with a brief summary of federal efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to equalize schooling, he then moves to consider the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. Although that document did not recommend national standards for K-12 education, its description of the sorry nature of schools in the United States led policy makers to consider ways that current achievement data could be used to create a better understanding of gaps in student learning. In essence this set in place a dialogue about goals and standards for the nation's K-12 education system that continues today. After establishing a policy backdrop of federal attempts to improve schooling, Vinovskis describes the 1989 Charlottesville Education Summit; a meeting of governors, President H.W. Bush and his Cabinet at which a set of six education goals were endorsed. Much of the remainder of the book describes in considerable detail efforts to codify and build broad-based support for these goals and two additional ones added when the U.S. Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as the America 2000 Educate America Act. Included is the creation, and ultimate demise in 2002, of the National Education Goals Panel. The policy history portion of this book concludes with the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). It is written with a touch of nostalgia and a sense that the author was frustrated by efforts of the Congress and others who tinkered with the goals agreed upon at the Charlottesville Summit and that one of the major supporters of the goals, President Clinton, was not able to sustain momentum for them.

Political and policy histories are as interesting for what is not included as for what is. The next part of this review considers what was not included in this book. The first is the lack of a conceptual framework or discussion of political

Maris A. Vinovskis is the University of Michigan Bentley Professor of History, IRS Research Professor, and Professor at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. He has published 9 books, edited 7 books, and written more than 100 scholarly essays. He was the deputy staff director to the U.S. House Select Committee on Population in 1978 and served as a consultant on population and adolescent pregnancy issues in the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in the early 1980s.



theory to help explain or make sense of events documented by the author. Debates about national goals and standards illustrate the love/hate relationship the public and policy makers have with the notion of centralized governance of education. Moreover during the decades from the 1970s to the present there have been shifts in how the broad purpose of education is articulated in the policy arena. Implied in the final eight education goals, as authorized in law, is the expectation that for all children to be successful, it will be necessary to ramp up compensatory programs for children in poverty, children who do not speak English, and children with disabilities. However, subsequent arguments in favor NCLB and the current effort to forge agreement on national education standards are anchored primarily in economic competitive arguments. The logic in these arguments is that a quality education for disadvantaged children is necessary so they will be productive workers with support for education as a means to improve the human condition or promote civic values rarely heard.

It is important to note that, governors notwithstanding, the national education goals were top down and support was broad but shallow. Once governors returned to their home states other issues competed for time on their agendas and although they may have assumed or hoped the enthusiasm of the Charlottesville Summit would spread from the state house to districts, to schools, to classrooms, this was not necessarily the case. Even if a substantial groundswell for the eight goals had emerged, to sustain support for an initiative at the federal level it is necessary to have support from a number of quarters, however by the end of the Clinton Administration even those who supported the idea of national goals and were involved in crafting them were unwilling to use political capital to lobby for them.

Vinovskis reports in detail attempts to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the final months of the Clinton Administration and the subsequent passage of NCLB in the first year of the Bush Administration. It would be helpful to have more context on events leading to the passage of NCLB. Because of the 9/11 attacks, the final bill was written during a time of stress and

the outcome was a messy piece of legislation. This is evidenced by the amount of time spend on regulations for the law, the number of waivers offered by Secretary of Education Spellings, and confirmed by my own meeting with senior Department of Education officials in early 2002 who were confused and uncertain about the new law's details.

This book will be a useful reference for readers who have some knowledge of the Washington, DC political process. Readers unfamiliar with nuances of legislative procedures would be helped by some basic clarifications. As an example, Vinovskis discusses various reauthorizations of ESEA and notes with dismay that the law wasn't reauthorized during the last years of the Clinton Administration. A quick primer on how and why major bills such as ESEA and others are reauthorized would be helpful along with how the policy world adjusts when a reauthorization does not happen as scheduled. Many students new to policy studies were in elementary school during many of the events documented in this book. A simple timeline and notation of key players would help frame events for those readers.

To document this history, Vinovskis draws on his own experiences and notes that many of the working papers, memoranda, and the like associated with discussions and ultimately decisions about national standards is "scattered among agencies and individuals;" (p. 5) and that he used personal contacts and interviews with decision makers to unearth previously unpublished material. This is both a strength and a weakness of this book. The reference list is extensive and impressive including articles from *Education Week* a generally respected trade paper. What was somewhat perplexing was the number of references from *Education Daily*, a newsletter I read faithfully for most of the quarter of a century I worked in Washington, DC. Those of us who subscribed to this newsletter did so for information about pending hearings, newly introduced bills, and announcement of major reports. At 4-8 pages, the newsletter's reporters did not, nor do they now, have the luxury of writing long, in-depth stories so the information often is abbreviated into sound bites. This point is offered because if a reader decided to further investigate an event and went to an *Education Daily*

reference in the text, she or he could potentially be misled. Because Vinovskis relied on such a broad and unique set of references a more expansive discussion of these sources and how they were used would be useful for those interested in future research on national education standards policy.

The final chapter, Concluding Observations, is an essay in which Vinovskis identifies the larger social and demographic factors that contribute to the achievement gap and, absent strong political will, hamper serious school reform. He suggests a number of interpretations for why school reform has not been successful—lack of federal focus on the initial six national goals, the proliferation of small categorical programs that draw resources from comprehensive school reform, lack of policy maker accountability, the challenge of teacher quality, and many others. Not all educators, parents, and policy makers will agree with his suggestions to resolve these problems, but these last 28 pages could stand alone as a launching point for serious conversations about the role of local, state, and federal governments to, in the words of Vinovskis, “Recommit[ing] Ourselves to Educate All Children” (p. 234).

About the Reviewer

Penelope M. Earley is a professor and director of the Center for Education Policy and Evaluation at George Mason University where she teaches education policy in the Graduate School of Education. Prior to moving to her current position she was Vice President at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education with responsibility for governmental relations.



Copyright is retained by the first or sole author,
who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.
<http://edrev.asu.edu>

Editors
Gene V Glass
Gustavo Fischman
Melissa Cast-Brede