

INTRODUCTION

IF YOU'RE AN EDUCATION REFORMER or policy wonk, as I like to think of myself today, or a federal or state education official, as I've been from time to time, you probably already know that America's most important testing program is one that most people have never heard of. It's *not* the SAT, the ACT, Advanced Placement, the Armed Forces Qualification Test, the annual state assessments required by federal law, much less the contentious entry tests employed by selective high schools such as Stuyvesant and Boston Latin.

Nope. Those are all widely used, hotly debated, and much in the news of late, but they're far from most important. Topping the list of what really matters is the National Assessment of Educational Progress, aka "the Nation's Report Card" and widely referred to simply as "NAEP."

Most of the time, it doesn't make much news. It's relatively low key—remarkable for any test at a time when testing has grown so contentious—and it rarely elicits strong feelings. Which means it doesn't have many enemies, nor many cheerleaders either. Perhaps because it's been around for more than half a century, those who are even aware of it tend to take it for granted, part of the education furniture that was already in the room long before they entered.

Most people, however, are scarcely conscious of it. In fact, when people asked me in recent months what I was working on and I said "a book about the past, present, and future of NAEP," the response, except among fellow ed-wonks, was often a blank look and polite smile. Educated and worldly though my interlocutor probably was, he or she seldom had any idea what I was talking about.

Surprised? You've every right to be. But maybe this is a topic worth knowing a bit more about. Providing readers with some of that added understanding and appreciation is one goal of this book. Another is to lay out the major issues and uncertainties facing NAEP today and examine several scenarios for its future, concluding with one that feels right to me.

NAEP has intersected with my own life since 1969 when, at the unripe age of twenty-five, I found myself behind a desk in the Old Executive Office Building as a very junior participant in President Nixon's White House staff, brought there by my graduate school adviser and mentor, the late Daniel P. Moynihan, who had just become a senior member of a multi-headed domestic policy team back in those heady pre-Watergate days.

NAEP was a toddler then, recently entrusted to the brand-new Education Commission of the States, whose executive director evidently thought he should explain it to this green education staffer at the White House, probably because the federal government was paying for it—and wasn't paying enough. That visit introduced me to the National Assessment, and it's been in and out of my life and work ever since. The busiest phase came in the decade after 1985 when, first as Bill Bennett's assistant secretary for research and then as first chair of the new National Assessment Governing Board, I had a fair amount to do with nudging NAEP onto what might be termed its modern trajectory. In the years since, I've kibitzed, advised, scribbled, and occasionally nudged some more, but from outside. Still, if I were hit by a truck tomorrow and someone grasped for anything worth putting into an obituary, I'd hope that my recurring connection with the Nation's Report Card might make it into the third or fourth paragraph.

So yes, this is a very personal book, and you will encounter in these pages both my satisfaction and admiration for what NAEP has accomplished, my exasperation with its shortcomings, my anguish over its trade-offs and dilemmas, and my hopes for its future. But only occasionally is it about me, and I'm not the reason you should read it. The reason to dig in is that this poorly understood and inadequately appreciated federal program is a precious resource for all who worry about the country's future. No matter whether your foremost concern is international economic competitiveness or domestic equity, the excellence of our workforce or the upward mobility of children born into poverty and discrimination, the performance of our education system or the return on taxpayer dollars, you

won't get the information you need without NAEP. Yet NAEP's capacity to deliver that information depends on you and those you place in leadership roles, not only in Washington but also in the statehouse and on the local school board. NAEP is part of a culture and policy regime that value accurate information about educational outcomes. If that culture and policy regime endure, America will continue to need and benefit from a robust national assessment.

I hope the following pages—six chapters of orientation and history, followed by five devoted to today's issues and tomorrow's possibilities—will give you a deeper understanding of how NAEP works, where it came from, why we need it, the challenges that it faces, and the ways it could be even more valuable in years to come.