Figure S-1. Real Current Expenditure per Student, 1890–1990

1990 dollars

Source: Hanushek and Rivkin (1994).
Figure 3-1. Real Current Expenditure per Student, by Instructional Staff and Other Expenditures, 1890–1990

1990 dollars

II. What Has Been the Result of These Efforts and, More Importantly, Are We Still at Risk?

In 1983, we faced a grave risk of losing our leading position in the world, the Commission warned. We had little idea of how we were doing, and we were happily complacent in assuming that we had, and would continue to have, the best schools money could buy. The report challenged this illusion and forced us to recognize the profound deficiencies in our educational system. In the last two decades, policymakers have worked to develop measurement systems that obviate the need for another such surprising report and that keep the country aware of the challenges we face.

As a result of No Child Left Behind, we now have annual test score data on students in reading and math from the third grade through the eighth grade and once in high school. We are able to see how well each of the approximately 96,000 public schools in our country is performing, not just overall but also for each group of students a school serves, such as minority students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. We have transformed ourselves from a nation at risk of complacency to a nation that is accountable and at work on its education weaknesses. We now know the daunting scope of the problem—and must enlist everyone to address weaknesses if we are to make progress up the mountain.
While many rightly choose to point to our international performance as a sign that we are not achieving at the level we should, it must be acknowledged that the United States expects every one of its students to be proficient in reading and math. Our public schools welcome all children, and we expect that they will be able to, at a minimum, graduate from high school and pursue their goals. We believe that the aspirations of every child are valid and should not be limited. This may make our task more difficult, but, as recognized in 1983, we must hold ourselves accountable for making it happen.

**III. Remaining Challenges**

On a strictly domestic level, our performance at the high school level is as alarming as it was at the time of *A Nation at Risk*, if not worse. Of major concern here is the number of students dropping out of school before they get their high school diplomas. States and districts have used a variety of ways to measure graduation rates, pointing to the need for more accuracy and consistency in these calculations.
But the tragedy is not a burden of the individual alone. High dropout rates also affect our communities and the nation because of the loss of productive workers and the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services. A recent report noted, “Four out of every 10 young adults (ages 16–24) lacking a high school diploma received some [sort of public relief] in 2001.” This report also noted, “… a dropout is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person with at least a high school diploma.”

Much of the dropout crisis is concentrated, however. About 1,700 of America’s 14,500 traditional high schools with enrollment over 100 students are responsible for approximately half of the students who leave school before 12th grade. In these schools—often called dropout factories—less than 60 percent of ninth-graders are enrolled as 12th-graders four years later, while in the other roughly 12,000 high schools, nearly 90 percent of those who started are still enrolled by their senior year. Out of a freshman classroom of 20 students in one of these dropout factories, only 12 will be around to become seniors, versus 18 in the rest of the schools. Distressingly, these dropout factories have much higher percentages of low-income and minority students.