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Independent Task Force Report No. 68

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U.S. Education Reform
and National Security

Chairs' Preface

Under its Renewing America initiative, the Council on Foreign Relations has focused attention on the domestic sources of American strength and global leadership. Education is one of those core strengths—and its erosion will undermine the United States' ability to lead.

When we as chairs convened this Task Force, we asked, Why is K-12 public school education a national security issue?

First, it is critical that children in the United States be prepared for futures in a globalized world. They must master essential reading, writing, math, and science skills, acquire foreign languages, learn about the world, and—importantly—understand America's core institutions and values in order to be engaged in the community and in the international system.

Second, the United States must produce enough citizens with critical skills to fill the ranks of the Foreign Service, the intelligence community, and the armed forces. For the United States to maintain its military and diplomatic leadership role, it needs highly qualified and capable men and women to conduct its foreign affairs.

Third, the state of America's education system has consequences for economic competitiveness and innovation. No country in the twenty-first century can be truly secure by military might alone. The dominant power of the twenty-first century will depend on human capital. The failure to produce that capital will undermine American security.

Finally, the United States cannot be two countries—one educated and one not, one employable and one not. Such a divide would undermine the country's cohesion and confidence and America's ability and willingness to lead. Opportunity and promise for all Americans are bedrock principles upon which this country was founded.

The United States is an exceptional nation in many ways. As a people, we are not held together by blood, nationality, ethnicity, or religion. The true American identity is born of the idea that it does not matter where

you came from; it only matters where you are going. And thus, solutions to education must be unique and foster the American identity among citizens. The circumstance in which this American ideal is no longer obtainable for a substantial part of the American population is unacceptable.

While recognizing the improvement efforts already in progress, this report details the above concerns and offers recommendations to build upon the American education system today. This is a clarion call to the nation, aiming to magnify the need for change. We feel strongly that the United States must continue to provide an education that allows our country to lead the international community. The nation cannot allow Americans to lose confidence or the country to turn inward, resulting in a lack of American leadership around the world.

American education is vital to sustaining the nation's international leadership and competitiveness. And it is core to upholding the American ideals that our forefathers set out to establish in this democracy. We took on this project because we believe that the crucial question for our generation is whether the American Dream becomes the American memory on our watch. We believe and hope that the American Dream can still be sustained.

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