

Career Builders

COMMISSION'S "TOUGH CHOICES OR TOUGH TIMES" REPORT CALLS FOR BIGGEST CHANGES IN AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM IN A CENTURY

New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce Says U.S. Standard of Living Jeopardized by Current System—Offers Framework for Change

Declaring the U.S. is continuing to lose the education race to other nations in this new global economy, The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce has published a new report entitled "Tough Choices or Tough Times" which lays out a plan for the total overhaul of U.S. education by 2021.

"The first Commission, in 1990, never dreamed that we would end up competing with countries that could offer large numbers of highly educated workers willing to work for low wages. American workers must match their education levels — a big challenge — but our workers' wages will still fall unless we can offer something else, and that is a capacity for endless creativity and innovation," noted Chairman Charles Knapp.

To confront this U.S. crisis head-on, the bi-partisan commission, comprised of former Cabinet secretaries, governors, college presidents and business, civic and labor leaders, is calling for a total shakeup in how America educates its people with an innovative system that boosts students to unprecedented levels of learning throughout their lives while creating a structure that gives them the best teachers and schools the country can offer.

The report points out that the United States has one of the most expensive elementary and secondary education systems in the world, one that produces only mediocre results. Because it is the system that is the problem, it is the system that must be rebuilt, the Commissioners noted.

The report lays out a series of steps that are designed as an integrated approach to changing the entire system, and it warns that only selecting ideas that "cost the least and offend the fewest will not solve the problem." The new system would support students beginning at age three and create an infrastructure to stimulate learning, dramatically increase the number of students headed to college, and allow everyone in the workforce the chance to strengthen and improve their skills. The recommendations include:

- **Revamping the high school-college transition.** High school would end for most students after 10th grade, when they would take rigorous State Board Exams set to what they should be able to do to succeed in state colleges. Students meeting that Board Exam standard would be able to go directly to state technical schools and colleges as freshmen. But students could choose to stay in high school to prepare for entrance to selective colleges, if they wished.
- **Reallocating funds to high priority strategies for improving system performance.** The new progression through high school and college would release nearly \$60 billion in funds that can be used to make sure that students would in fact be ready for college by the time they are 16.

- **Pre-K for all.** A third of the savings would be used to provide high-quality early childhood education for all four-year-olds and all low-income three-year olds.
- **Redesigning how schools are funded.** The last third of the savings would be used to provide more money to schools serving low-income and other disadvantaged children. Local funding would be abolished; the funds would be raised and distributed to the schools by the state.
- **Redesigning how schools are managed.** All public schools would be managed by independent contractors operating under performance contracts managed by the local school districts. Only those schools that succeeded in improving the performance of their students would be funded. Parents would be free to send their children to any of these schools they wished.
- **Educating the current workforce to a high standard.** Adults who are currently in the workforce would have the right to a free education to the same standard that would be set for high school students under the new system.
- **Creating personal competitiveness accounts.** Inspired by the GI bill, the federal government would deposit an initial \$500 into each account at birth, and these accounts would allow everyone to receive ongoing education and training throughout their lives. “Our education and training systems were built for another era. It is not possible to get where we have to go by patching that system, and there is not enough money available at any level to fix this problem by spending more on the system we have,” says Marc Tucker, Commission Vice- Chairman and Staff Director. “We believe this kind of change, which will take 15 years of hard work to implement, will result in what will plausibly be the best national public school system in the world.”

The Commission was organized by the National Center on Education and the Economy, a not-for profit organization created to develop proposals for building the world class education and training system that the United States must have if it is to continue to be a world class economy.

The Commission’s work was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education.

The Commission’s full report is available from Jossey Bass Publishers in bookstores and Amazon.com. Further information is available at: www.skillscommission.org