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U.S. Urged to Reinvent Its Schools

Education groups favor parts of sweeping plan, call others too drastic.

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Washington

A report calling for a top-to-bottom overhaul of the U.S. education and training system to help Americans compete in a global economy drew lavish praise and sharp criticism last week, foreshadowing what a heavy political lift its recommendations would likely be to carry out.

Titled "Tough Choices or Tough Times," the report was unveiled at an all-day meeting here Dec. 14 by a prominent panel whose members include former U.S. secretaries of education and labor, retired governors and mayors, state and local superintendents, and business executives.

Its vision for what's ailing American education and how to fix it takes on virtually every sacred cow and special-interest group in the system.

Among its proposals: Teachers employed by states rather than districts. State, not local, financing of education. Schools no longer run by districts but by independent contractors. Teenagers who take exams at age 16 that let them enroll immediately in community or technical colleges. High-quality early education available to all 4-year-olds and to all 3-year-olds from low-income families.

"This is a systemic approach, which I think is very good and new and different," said Richard W. Riley, the U.S. secretary of education in the Clinton administration and a member of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, which produced the report. "The best thing that we can accomplish out of this report is a national conversation on all of these issues."

That conversation is needed, according to the commission, because even high-skilled workers in the United States are now competing against equally skilled, equally well-educated workers in other countries. To maintain its standard of living, the report argues, America will have to keep a razor-sharp technological edge and produce workers who have both much higher levels of academic knowledge than they do now and a deep vein of creativity that enables them to keep generating innovative products and services.

"I become more concerned each day that our students are falling further behind and the people of this nation do not seem to be alarmed," said David

P. Driscoll, the Massachusetts commissioner of education and a member of the panel. "This report lays out the kind of drastic change to the system that is crucial if we are to remain a viable economic and political leader in the world."

The commission was convened by the Washington-based National Center on Education and the Economy. Its work was supported by grants from the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation for Education, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, based in Menlo Park, Calif.

Responses Guarded

While many education groups appeared eager to join the conversation the report seeks to inspire, their responses suggested they'd rather pick and choose among its proposals than endorse them wholesale.

The call for high-quality universal preschool seemed to draw virtually unanimous praise. It is based on a large body of research suggesting the importance of getting young children ready for school.

Similarly, many people lauded the report's analysis of the international competition in which the United States finds itself and the need to produce young people with the skills required to thrive in that environment. And many agreed that current systems of student assessment should be replaced with a more robust and challenging set of exams for high school students that would be tied to a rich curriculum.

Both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers also applauded the call for raising teacher salaries, but decried the idea of paying for the raises, in part, by trimming back pension and health benefits. Antonia Cortese, the executive vice president of the AFT, called the proposal an "unacceptable shell game."

Anne L. Bryant, the executive director of the Alexandria, Va.-based National School Boards Association, described the report as "groundbreaking," but went on to question how much ground can be broken without destroying what works in American education. In particular, she cautioned against reducing local community involvement and contracting with outside organizations to operate schools, rather than have districts run schools themselves.

Thomas W. Payzant, a commission member and a former superintendent of the Boston public schools, argued that a recommendation to have states assume total financing of education, and to allocate money to pupils based on their needs, could provide a way out of current school finance lawsuits in

many states.

"That's a huge carrot," he said. It also could create economies of scale that could lead to improvements in quality, he suggested.

But John I. Wilson, the executive director of the NEA, the nation's largest teachers' union, questioned both the wisdom and the practicality of removing local funding of education, "because I believe communities should own their schools."

"I think it would be against the American way" to tamper with local control, he said. "I think that will be the hardest hurdle."

"This is a huge lift politically," said William E. Kirwan, the chancellor of the University System of Maryland, who praised the governance changes proposed. "There are unimaginable obstacles to getting something like this produced."

"We're well aware that we're going after powerful special interests who are going to oppose this," said Charles B. Knapp, a president emeritus of the University of Georgia and the commission's chairman.

"This is about the kids," he argued. "It's not about the special interests involved."

Many panelists at last week's meeting suggested that it would be up to the states to show that the commission's vision for education is achievable.

Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, commended the report as "*A Nation at Risk* for the next generation," referring to the 1983 report that helped launch the movement for standards-based education. Like that report, he said, the current one could help "push American education around an important corner."

"I think it probably will take some place showing how it actually works," he said. "A small but progressive state could probably do most of these things by itself."

Marc S. Tucker, the president of the National Center on Education and the Economy and the staff director of the commission, said the commission would be looking for a small group of states that are "ready to go the distance." The commission will do all it can to support them, he said, in part by raising money to help states make the transition to a new way of doing business.

The commission estimates that its far-ranging proposals, when fully in place, would require \$7.8 billion per year in new revenues, little more than the existing system. But that assumes significant cost savings—around \$67 billion—that would not be realized until most students were well enough

prepared to leave high school at age 16 and enroll in college without needing remedial classes.

The panel has asked Robert M. Palaich, a Denver-based education finance expert, to devise scenarios for how to pay for the shift from one system to another.

'Breathtaking' Scope

Andrew J. Rotherham, a co-director of Education Sector, a Washington think tank, praised the report for not proposing substantial new spending overall. "It calls for reallocating existing resources," he said, "and puts some pretty tough ideas on the table for doing that."

"The scope is somewhat breathtaking," said John Engler, a commission member and a former governor of Michigan, who is the president of the National Association of Manufacturers. "It's designed to create a vision of what could be."

But he maintained that the plans are feasible, comparing the undertaking to state experiments with welfare reform in the early 1990s. At first, he said, governors who dared to take on that complex system "went through some pretty heavy seas, too."

Just as with welfare reform, Mr. Engler said, "I think there are going to be some governors who are going to take this up." Business also will respond "on the workforce part of this," he said.

At least one state legislator said he's ready and willing. Andrew Romanoff, the speaker of the Colorado House of Representatives, said, "I

Agenda for an Overhaul

"Tough Choices or Tough Times" proposes sweeping changes in the U.S. education system.

End high school sooner for most students:

Expect most 10th graders to pass new state exams that would let them leave high school and enter community colleges directly without remediation. High-scoring students could stay in high school for advanced coursework to prepare for admission to selective colleges.

Invest in early-childhood education:

Make high-quality early-childhood education available to all 4-year-olds and all low-income 3-year-olds.

Recruit better students to be teachers:

Raise pay for novice teachers and those at the top of redesigned career ladders. Have teachers work directly for states. Link compensation in part to student performance and offer incentives for teachers who work in shortage fields and hard-to-staff urban and rural areas.

Put schools under performance

contracts: Shift the role of school districts from one of running public schools to that of contracting with outside operators to do so. Let students choose among schools, which would be affiliated with state-approved networks that provide professional development and other forms of help.

Rebuild standards, assessments, and

curriculum: Improve the quality and reduce

support this report, and I intend to go home tomorrow and begin the process by which Colorado will begin implementing these recommendations.”

But even he pointed to three significant challenges: a state constitution that enshrines the principle of local control, policymakers focused on short-term rather than long-term thinking, and voters comfortable with the status quo.

“It is in my view a call to arms for a fight that this nation should join,” Mr. Romanoff, a Democrat, said of the report.

Samuel Halperin, the founder of the Washington-based American Youth Policy Forum, who has held leadership positions in academia, the federal government, a foundation, and nonprofit organizations for more than 40 years, cautioned: “It’s going to take months, if not years, until the public really hears the message of today out in the hinterlands; it’s such a huge country and such an overload of information.”

“I think the report is terrific,” he added. “I think the ideas are exciting. I think the barriers are enormous.”

But William E. Brock, a commission member and a former U.S. secretary of labor, suggested there isn’t a choice. “If we don’t have a constituency in America for the education of our children to compete in a world that is networked globally,” he said, “then we might as well start shooting ourselves.”

“People have got to understand that what we’ve got is not working,” Mr. Brock said. “It’s not working for kids, but it’s not working for teachers either.”

the number of assessments. Preface syllabus-based high school exams with national literacy and math tests in the lower grades. Promote creativity and innovation in addition to mastery of key ideas, core facts, and procedures.

Make school funding more equitable:

Fund schools directly by the state under a formula that gives more money for students with greater needs. Add \$19 billion to the system and provide extra help—such as an extended school day, tutoring, and mentoring—so disadvantaged youngsters can meet higher standards.

Support lifelong learning: Guarantee all workers age 16 or older access to a free education up to the new high school exam standard. Also, start federally financed education accounts for every child, depositing \$500 at birth and \$100 each year until age 16. Individuals, parents, states, and employers could contribute.

Create regional economic-development authorities: Have the federal government support states and localities in setting up authorities that combine economic development, adult education, and job training.

SOURCE: New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce

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