

## U.S. EDUCATION: FROM BAD TO WORSE

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The catastrophic decline in the quality of American public education has been diagnosed repeatedly since the 1950s in works such as James B. Conant's *The American High School Today* [*The Conant Report*] (1959), *The Shopping Mall High School* (1985), or E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1987). Now, a new report in this tradition offers up perhaps the most scathing indictment of our system yet. The report, issued on December 14, 2006, by the National Center on Education and the Economy's New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, is titled *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. The title suggests that if we do not make the difficult decisions that are required to resuscitate our schools, our future health as a nation is bleak.

The report is a thorough, strong, and incisive analysis of the extent to which American dominance in education worldwide has eroded along with our dominance in economics and market competitiveness. Moreover, despite some minor weaknesses in the report caused by its attempt to predict the global future and its occasional political caution, it should launch a national dialogue on our public education system. I fear that it will not. Its appearance was barely (and somewhat inaccurately) noticed in the print media, was invisible on the visual media, and went unremarked in the local, state, and national halls of legislation.

In the Executive Summary, the commission members indicate the breadth of the educational quagmire into which we have fallen thus:

Over the past 30 years, one country after another has surpassed us in the proportion of their entering workforce with the equivalent of a high school diploma, and many more are on the verge of doing so. Thirty years ago, the United States could lay claim to having 30 percent of the world's population of college students. Today that proportion has fallen to 14 percent and is continuing to fall.

While our international counterparts are increasingly getting more education, their young people are getting a better education as well. American students place anywhere from the middle to the bottom of the pack in [student] achievement...in the advanced industrial nations.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (cited in the report), in percent of working-age adults who have completed at least high school, the top four nations are Korea, Norway, Japan, and the Czech Republic. The bottom three are Mexico, Turkey, and Portugal. The United States ranks eighth and is dropping lower every year.

Since the engine of economic and social health is education, if we do not act soon and prepare ourselves for a painful 12 to 15 year transition to effect needed change, our preeminence as a nation will be gone, perhaps irretrievably. This is no more a Chicken Littlish alarmism than are the concerns over trade deficits and global warming, however much the status quo-ists would like us to think that it is. After all, as things stand now, for every 100 students who enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade in this country, only 18 will go on to earn either an Associate's Degree or a B.A. within six years after high school graduation.

The commission's comprehensive plan for reforming our education system falls into seven broad categories:

- (1) Students must be held to much higher performance standards.
- (2) Teachers must be held to much higher, and truly professional, requirements of academic competence.
- (3) The governance of schools must be streamlined, universalized, and de-bureaucratized.
- (4) There must be a much greater investment in early childhood education, beginning with intensive programs for three- and four-year olds.
- (5) School financing must be reconfigured so that all disadvantaged children receive the services that will eradicate inequities in cultural background, access to health care, and other social disparities.
- (6) A core curriculum must be established, and assessment (testing) should focus more on thinking and less on machine-driven multiple-choice formats.
- (7) A no-charge system must be put in place that allows all members of the current workforce to avail themselves of the education that they need to achieve parity with the new breed of student that will be emerging.

This is a bold and comprehensive prospectus. It deserves to be adopted as a whole without the cherry picking that only serves to perpetuate the current system.

As Joel I. Klein, Chancellor of the New York Public Schools, emphasized in an epilogue to the Executive Summary: "any attempt to achieve effective, comprehensive school reform will require the transformation of the culture in our schools—from one that is excuse based and compliance driven...to one that recognizes the importance of...meaningful accountability for student performance."

In future columns, I will examine these seven components in more detail.

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