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'Tough Choices': Radical Ideas, Misguided Assumptions

By Diane Ravitch



**Diane
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There is a line between visionary thinking and pie-in-the-sky theorizing. The recent report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, "Tough Choices or Tough Times," is most assuredly on the wrong side of that line. Not only is this widely publicized and much-praised report an exercise in pie-in-the-sky theorizing, it would—if enacted—dismantle American public education. The report itself says as much. It says that the present system of education is no good, and we must start over.

Like many previous reports, this one lays out a string of criticisms of our education system, most of which are unassailable, and then proceeds to propose a variety of changes. In this case, however, most of the report's prescriptions are not only radical but dubious. Some of them are risky gambles with one of our most vital social institutions.

Frankly, it is difficult to understand how a commission composed of so many distinguished men and women produced such an ill-conceived document. One imagines the horse-trading that enabled each commissioner to get his or her

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favorite proposal added to the mix. That is the way such committee structures usually work. Yet the commission has the nerve to insist that no one should cherry-pick "only those ideas that cost the least and offend the fewest." No, they demand a wholesale adoption of their recommendations.

Let us briefly review the most important of them.

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Read the accompanying commentary by Marc S. Tucker, "['Tough Choices': Change the System, or Suffer the Consequences.](#)"

First, the report proposes that all students at the end of 10th grade take a board examination (created by states, the national government, or international organizations) in core subjects. Those who score "well enough" will have the right to go to a community college for a two-year technical degree or a program leading to a four-year state college. Those who score even better can stay in high school longer to prepare for a second set of exams; if they do well on those exams, then they can go to a selective college.

What's wrong with this? Lots of things. The first set of exams will supposedly be set at the same level as those of "the countries that do the best job educating their students," but the commission asserts that 95 percent of all students will meet this standard. Indeed, they also say that "no one would fail," because students can take the exams again and again. So this exam is actually a very low bar that will be used to divide students into two groups: those bound for two-year colleges and those bound for four-year colleges. (No further mention is made of the 5 percent who can't pass this low hurdle.) One may safely predict that the two-year group will be composed mainly of students who are African-American, Hispanic, recent immigrants, and poor. It is not clear how this proposal will improve academic performance or why the nation needs to construct this elaborate examination system to sort young people into careers.

Second, the report calls for "a major overhaul of the American testing industry" to assure the development of tests that measure such things as creativity and innovation, teamwork, abstract thinking, and self-discipline. The report says portentously, "If that is not done, then nothing else will matter."

What's wrong with this? If the proposed examination system, indeed the

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entire report, hinges on the creation of tests that measure creativity, innovation, self-discipline, and self-worth, then the whole enterprise is a house of cards. The report fails to identify a single test, not in this country or anywhere else, that successfully measures these qualities.

A third recommendation is universal preschool education, not exactly a radical or original idea. It is one that nearly everyone applauds.

What's wrong with this? Nothing. It requires only a political willingness to pay the cost of a high-quality educational program, not just day care.

A fourth recommendation is that teachers should be recruited from the top third of high school graduates going on to college. The report says that the way to do this is to pay teachers more (a starting salary of about \$45,000 per year and a top salary of about \$110,000 a year) while cutting their pensions and health benefits. The cost of higher salaries would be funded by cuts in benefits.

What's wrong with this? The relatively meager increases in compensation proposed by the commission are nowhere near enough to induce teachers to give up their retirement benefits. Nor are the proposed salaries large enough to recruit "the best and the brightest" to enter teaching as a career instead of law, medicine, or investment banking. If the commission really wants to achieve the goal of getting the best educated graduates to become teachers, then it should propose a starting salary of, say, \$70,000 and a top salary of, let's say, \$300,000, so that teaching could truly compete with the jobs that are currently attracting the top students. Better yet, to avoid invoking an arbitrary number, why not take the median income of the members of the commission and use that as a target for compensation of the top-performing teachers?

A fifth recommendation is to change radically the governance structure of public education. Every school would be "operated by independent contractors" instead of the local school board; the new role of the local board would be to write performance contracts, monitor the work of the

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contractors, and collect data.

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What's wrong with this? To date, there is no evidence to demonstrate that independent contractors are better able to operate schools than local school districts. No high-performing nation has assigned control of its public schools to independent contractors. The contractors who are ready to run public schools are few in number. Some, like Edison Schools Inc. and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), have good records; others have failed or gone bankrupt. It is inconceivable that the nation is ready to turn over tens of thousands of schools to contractors that have thus far managed only a few dozen schools or never run more than one school, or that do not now even exist. This is the riskiest and most incomprehensible gamble of all.

A sixth recommendation is to abandon local funding of education in favor of state funding, with dollars matched to the needs of individual students. Thus, schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students would have more funding than schools that serve a more advantaged population.

What's wrong with this? Not much, other than the resistance of local communities that don't want to relinquish control of their budgets. Since the trend of state court decisions is pushing school finance toward a state-funded system, this recommendation is one of the few that stand a chance of influencing public policy.

A seventh recommendation is to create "Personal Competitiveness Accounts," that is, savings accounts for individuals that can be used only for work-related training. The government would establish such an account for every new baby with an initial deposit of \$500. The initial cost of this program, which the commission calls a "new GI Bill," would be \$31 billion per year. Employers and states could eventually add to the accounts.

What's wrong with this? It is not clear why employers and states would have an incentive to pay the billions necessary to enlarge these accounts. Nor is it clear that the establishment of such accounts would be more cost-effective than making high-quality job training available at low cost when needed, either by employers or community colleges.

An eighth recommendation is to “create regional competitiveness authorities to make America competitive.” The report says that Congress should encourage states to establish “regional economic-development authorities involving the key leaders from many sectors in those regions in the development of economic-development strategies that make sense to them.” These authorities would coordinate the work of the region’s education and training institutions “to make sure that each region’s workers develop the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in that labor market.”

What’s wrong with this? In a report that supposedly focuses on nimble, high-performance management, this is a bizarre proposal. It sounds a bit like a Soviet five-year plan. Why does Congress need to “encourage” states to establish regional authorities? Do regions really need such authorities to coordinate education and training institutions? Why would these authorities be the best guide to the skills and knowledge that workers need? This proposal promises nothing but a layer of bureaucratic management to try to steer the economy, a strategy that has never worked in the past and is not likely to work in the future.

Taken together, the report’s fervent advocacy of structural change stands in sharp contrast to its indifference to curriculum and instruction.

Taken together, the report’s fervent advocacy of structural change stands in sharp contrast to its indifference to curriculum and instruction. Structural changes, the commission argues, will save American education. They will bring about higher academic performance, a better-educated workforce, and a high-wage economy. Unfortunately, the commission’s report contains not a shred of evidence that its prescriptions will work. And common sense suggests that at least some of these prescriptions might harm the patient. One wishes that the commission members had begun their deliberations with a simple caveat: Do no harm.

*Diane Ravitch is a historian of education, a research professor at New York University, and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and the Brookings Institution. Her books include *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform*, *The Language Police*, and, most recently, *The English Reader*, which she edited with her son, Michael Ravitch.*

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