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from the December 15, 2006 edition

To fix US schools, panel says, start over

A high-powered group Thursday recommended college for some 16-year-olds and preschool for all.

By [Amanda Paulson](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

What if the solution to American students' stagnant performance levels and the wide achievement gap between white and minority students wasn't more money, smaller schools, or any of the reforms proposed in recent years, but rather a new education system altogether?

That's the conclusion of a bipartisan group of scholars and business leaders, school chancellors and education commissioners, and former cabinet secretaries and governors. They declare that America's public education system, designed to meet the needs of 100 years ago when the workplace revolved around an assembly line, is unsuited to today's global marketplace. Already, they warn, many Americans are in danger of falling behind and seeing their standard of living plummet.

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In its place, the group proposes a series of controversial reforms:

- Offer universal pre-kindergarten programs and opportunities for continuing education for adults without high school diplomas.
- Create state board exams that students could pass at age 16 to move either on to community college or to a university-level high school curriculum.
- Improve school salaries in exchange for reducing secure pension benefits, and pay teachers more to work with at-risk kids, for longer hours, or for high performance.
- Create curriculums that emphasize creativity and abstract concepts over rote learning or mastery of facts.

"We've squeezed everything we can out of a system that was designed a century ago," says Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, and vice chairman of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, which produced the report. "We've not only put in lots more money and not gotten significantly better results, we've also tried every program we can think of and not gotten significantly better results at scale. This is the sign of a system that has reached its limits."

The report is getting attention in part because of those involved - people like William Brock, the former senator and Reagan-era Labor secretary; John Engler, National Association of Manufacturers president and former Michigan governor; and Joel Klein, chancellor of New York's public schools.

It's also unusual in its scope and ambition, looking at public education in the context of changes in the global economy and workforce needs, and examining education for everyone from preschoolers to adults.

Many of the ideas are likely to encounter opposition. Even the group's proponents insist the report isn't an exact blueprint, but a framework - one they hope will be used to jumpstart a national conversation and entice a few states to experiment with overhauls inspired by these ideas, much the way states led the way with welfare reform in the early 1990s.

The report "is calling for a certain revolution, but it hasn't been put together by revolutionaries," says Mr. Tucker, optimistic that even the controversial ideas are politically feasible. "If you don't like the proposals



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we put on the ground, come up with some that will work better."

The commission insists, though, that these ideas won't work if only the least controversial and least costly are "cherry-picked" by states, emphasizing that they complement and bolster each other.

One of the biggest proposed changes - the state board examinations that would allow qualified 10th graders to move on to college - would eventually add up to \$67 billion in savings that could be reallocated elsewhere, the report estimates. In the transition period, commission members acknowledge, significant but feasible costs would be necessary.

Adults, too, would get access to the education needed to pass the new state board exams, and the commission suggests creating "personal competitiveness accounts" - created at birth and added to over time - that would help pay for continuing education throughout an individual's work life.

Another proposal: Scrap local school funding for a state-funded system that offers more to the needy districts but doesn't diminish the resources of wealthy districts. The report then calls for giving schools far more autonomy - making them, in essence, contract schools run by teachers or others who are monitored by districts but not owned by them.

Many of the suggestions have already run into opposition. Anne Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association, says she applauds the goals and some recommendations, but worries that the financial aspects don't add up. Decentralized school districts would weaken the system, Dr. Bryant says.


"It's a groundbreaking report, but how much ground can you afford to break before you start rattling what's really working in order to fix what is not?" she asks. "There's a leap of faith here in about 10 different areas."

But proponents insist that in a world that increasingly rewards only highly skilled, creative workers - in which America spends the second highest amount on education of any industrialized nation but performs in the bottom part of the pack - reforms this drastic are necessary.

"I think we've tried to do what we can to improve American schools within the current context," says Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, who says the commission has sparked an important debate. "Now we need to think much more daringly."

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Rising cost for stagnant results

A new report says these "small gains at ever-higher cost" are a sign that US public education needs an overhaul.

* In 2002 dollars

YEAR	COST PER STUDENT*	FOURTH-GRADE READING SCORES
1984	\$5,400	211
1988	6,100	212
1992	6,800	211
1996	6,950	213
1999	7,300	212
2002	8,977	217

SOURCE: NEW COMMISSION ON THE SKILLS OF THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE, USING DATA FROM THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS/RICH CLABAUGH - STAFF

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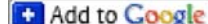
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