



Tough Choices Tough Times: The Report of the new Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce

National Center on Education and the Economy, John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

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I remember a guideline from a high school public speaking course I had years ago. The premise is that there are three parts to giving a speech. They are to first, tell the audience what you are going to say; second, tell the audience the message; and third, tell the audience what you just told them. The National Center on Education and the Economy Commissioners (NCEE) apply that formula in their current work *Tough choices or tough times: The report of the new Commission on the skills of the American workforce* (2007). This group of leaders from education, business, and government offers a challenge and a prescription to reverse the decline in our US education system so that Americans may be the most competent and creative workforce in the world.

The message that the Commission puts forth is a continuation of their first study, *America's choice: High skills or low wages* (1990). In that work they found that although some American workers were gaining financially, most were losing. The Commission's recommendation for solving this economic problem was to establish a standards base approach to all education. By equalizing American schools the Commission suggested people with higher skills could earn higher wages. After a 16 year hiatus, the new Commission now tackles the problem facing our workforce as a result of our global competitors passing us by. Countries like India and China are producing qualified professionals who are able to do the same work as we in the US, but at a lower wage. "Earnings for workers with four-year degrees fell 5.2% from 2000 to 2004 when adjusted for inflation, according to White House economists (NCCE, 2006, p. 3). The question is how do we convince employers to hire our graduates and not send jobs abroad? What must we do in order to prepare our children for this changing economic world?"

The recommended standards have been implemented throughout our districts' schools; but now the Commission has other concerns that focus on: 1) the cost of improving student performance, 2) the results of the 2005 Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, and 3) the impact of information technologies in the economy. With this background for their current work the NCEE's approach to the problem was to examine 24 of the best education systems around the world. The result: not a new program, but a new educational system.

This new system proposes a total make-over for the K-12 program that includes redesigning teacher recruitment, salary structure, and pension benefits. There are recommendations for changes in early learning programs too. For those of you who follow government funding for such programs you will probably appreciate the streamlining the Commission suggests. In order to improve student performance this group offers education that prepares students for learning (p. 84) and for life-long learning through a State Board Examination Board that would design the curricula that "reflect today's needs and tomorrow's requirements" (p. xxv), as well as

prepare and score the exams. The student first tests in the 10th grade. That score then determines the tract the student follows; that is, two years of upper secondary academic program, two to three years of regional vocational, community or technical college level, or some optional academic programs. Upon completion of the program, the student would either take the International Baccalaureate exam, the State Board Transfer exam, the advanced placement exam, or the technical exam (p.53).

For the many adults who are marginally prepared for the workforce the Commission offers a personal competitiveness account. This program would assist adults who do not meet the qualifications for higher education financial aid. The authors compare it to a “GI bill for our times” (p. 141). In addition, they suggest reorganizing the current Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the Economic Development Districts, as well as the Higher Education Act. This new structure would insure that those in charge of the system were working optimally for the people. Most of all, adults who had dropped out of school when they were in their teens, would have easier access to a high school education.

This book takes a complex system and reviews its weaknesses in light of the competitiveness in today’s global market-place, and offers a progressive educational program for all sectors of our society. The background papers contain compelling arguments for reform providing cost estimates for each program. Even though this work has received praise from educators and business leaders as presented on the book’s back cover, this reviewer found its organization a weakness. In addition, the persistent use of the word *then* when the author meant *than* was a distraction. Although the Commission presented its message three times, this reader would have enjoyed reading more about the sub-studies that are described briefly in the Appendix. *Tough choices or tough times: The report of the new Commission on the skills of the American workforce* (2007) challenges the status quo by its program offerings based on needs and realistic budgets. Therefore, it would be a useful text for graduate students in an education administration policy course and for those in policy making positions.

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