

The Entrepreneurs and the New Commission

Changing Minds in the Education Establishment

It's not that the latest commission said anything much that was actually "new," despite its name. The entrepreneurs participating in this issue's forum have been talking about—and doing—much of what it recommends for more than a decade. Yet *Tough Choices, Tough Times*, the report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, is remarkable all the same, if only for the signatures appended to the report.

The names are among the most prominent in the country's centrist educational establishment—two former U. S. Secretaries of Education (one a Republican, the other a Democrat), a former governor, school superintendents (including New York's Joel Klein and Boston's Tom Payzant), a state superintendent, two former labor leaders, and a variety of distinguished business and community leaders. The most aggressive proponents of school reform—Jeb Bush, Bill Bennett, Alan Bersin, and Tommy Thompson, for example—are notably absent. Also missing from the action are leading innovators and entrepreneurs. The dollars for the project came from the Gates, Hewlett, Casey, and Lumina foundations, all unlikely participants in a right-wing conspiracy.

Given the New Commission's sponsorship and composition, one could expect to read, in the great tradition of education commissions of the past, stirring words about the need for reform followed by tired platitudes about the need for greater co-operation. The stirring words are there, to be sure. America's schools are stagnating while the rest of the world quietly passes them by, the New Commission says.

But, then, the commission proves itself "New" after all. In its most surprising passage, it calls for a nation of charter schools. Though the word "charter" is scrupulously avoided, the report says the role of school boards needs to be cut back sharply. Instead, independent contractors are to receive equal

per-pupil funding (with extra for the disadvantaged) to operate schools of choice under state supervision. That looks, talks, and walks like an charter school system to me.

Charters are just the first step. The New Commission also calls for dramatic reform of the teaching profession. State certification regulations are to open up paths to teaching and put the emphasis on classroom performance. The teachers of the future are to be paid according to effectiveness ("merit pay"), the situation at their school ("battle pay"), and their skill sets (extra for math, science, and special education teachers).

Still more. Students are expected to pass substantive examinations, if they are to receive a high school diploma. Those exams will directly open the door to colleges and universities.

When so much is so well said, one hates to carp at a few lapses of judgment. But one does wonder why the New Commission felt a need to attack testing and accountability: "Our testing system rewards students who will be good at routine work, while not providing opportunities for students to display creative and innovative thinking." Certainly, students need to know how to read and calculate if their "innovative thinking"

is going to amount to much.

And the New Commission proposes to set salaries at the state level, not at each charter school separately, a recommendation that will certainly give the whip hand to teacher unions that would be in a position to call statewide, perhaps nationwide, sick-ins, strikes, and slow-downs.

But if one cannot sign on to every detail, one must certainly applaud the most exciting education report of the 21st century. Congratulations to the commission—and also to all those entrepreneurs who have demonstrated in the small what is proposed here on a grand scale (see forum, page 46).

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
