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Opinion

## Future of education requires “tough choices”

John LaPlante

Every so often, a blue-ribbon panel comes along, offering yet another set of recommendations for reforming the way that the U.S. educates itself. The latest panel earns high marks for ambition, but the chances of its recommendations being enacted are slight.

“Tough Choices or Tough Times,” released in December 2006, calls for major structural changes in the way that we run schools. It also calls for increasing public spending by \$19 billion each year.

Tough Choices is the product of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, a collection of governors, corporate CEOs, big-city school leaders, U.S. secretaries of education, and union leaders. Its 19 staff members and an army of consultants spent two years creating and reading reports and visiting 13 different countries.

The rationale of Tough Choices is familiar: in a world of globalized commerce, American prosperity depends on a population that performs high value-added, high-paying work. Outsourcing is being extended beyond manual labor to the professions, and competing on wages is a fool’s errand.

Like previous reports, such as “A Nation at Risk,” Tough Choices is heralded by apocalyptic language: without these changes, “we condemn our own kids to ever lower incomes,” said one commission member.

So what does Tough Choices recommend? The plan is so sweeping that only a few of its many points can be mentioned.

On the young side of childhood, it calls for extending the reach of public education down to three-year olds.

On the other side, it suggests ending schooling as we know it at the tenth grade. Students who then pass a board exam can proceed to a community college on either a technical or transfer track.

Other students will stay in high school to prepare for an International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement program. The commission suggests that these changes will save \$60 billion a year, which can be put into other initiatives.

One such initiative Tough Choices recommends is an approach that might be called “more cash, fewer guaranteed pensions.” That’s a smart move in its own right. But even a substantial rise in teacher pay—to \$45,000 for beginning teachers and \$95,000 for “typical teachers” across the nation—won’t be enough to satisfy union opposition to merit pay, something sorely needed in teaching.

The report also calls for alternatives to schools of education for the training and credentialing of teachers. That’s also a good idea, but again, it’s very hard for vested interests (including schools of education) to give way to independent third-party recommendations.

Is the solution to public education’s woes a grand bargain, a something-for-everyone approach? Perhaps. But the authors warn that for the plans of Tough Choices to do more good than harm, they must be enacted as a package.

Slim chance of that happening.

So what value does Tough Choices have? For one thing, it reminds us, again, that we need to rethink the way that we do school: finance it, manage it, introduce teachers to it, and so forth.

Rather than implement these complex plans that require national, state, and local government cooperation and top-down changes, lawmakers could start the necessary changes to education with a step that is simple, though difficult in its own right.

Make education funding portable. Let the family of every student direct where the money spent on that child goes. It could go to the incumbent district, a neighboring district, a charter school, or a private school.

Right now, families are free to spend early childhood tax credits wherever they like. There’s no restriction that it be spent at the local district, and we fund children and not systems. When families are free to spend K-12 education dollars in this way, innovation will accelerate. Even school bureaucracies will have no choice.

Granted, there are substantial political objections to this approach as well. But this bottom-up change will be easier to implement. It is a more sure path to necessary adaptation than Herculean task envisioned by Tough Choices.

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