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Schools Report Urges Drastic Change, Higher Salaries

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An independent commission yesterday proposed dramatic changes that would shake up American public education in an effort to make the nation more competitive globally. The recommendations include authorizing school districts to pay companies to run all their schools; enrolling many students in college after the 10th grade; and paying teachers about \$100,000 annually.

The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce -- a bipartisan panel that includes former Cabinet secretaries and governors in addition to federal and state education officials and business and civic leaders -- issued the recommendations in a report on the future workforce. The commissioners warned that unless improvements are made in the nation's public schools and colleges by 2021, a large number of jobs would be lost to countries including India and China, where workers are better educated and paid much less than their U.S. counterparts.

"We're calling for a complete shake-up from top to bottom," Charles Knapp, chairman of the commission, said at a news conference.

"The United States has one of the highest costs of education but produces mediocre results," added Knapp, former president of the University of Georgia. "The recommendations are absolutely necessary if we want America to maintain its standard of living."

The 170-page report, "Tough Choices or Tough Times," is the result of a year-long study by the panel, which includes New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg; Joel I. Klein, chancellor of the New York City public schools; former Michigan governor John Engler, president of the National Association of Manufacturers; Roderick R. Paige, former secretary of the U.S. Department of Education; Marc H. Morial, president and chief executive of the National Urban League and former mayor of New Orleans; and D.C. School Superintendent Clifford B. Janey. It was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education.

Implementing all the recommendations, commission members said, would cost about \$60 billion.

Education experts expect the study to spur public debates in legislatures and school board chambers across the country, much like the groundbreaking 1983 report "A Nation at Risk."

The report will prompt "constitutional changes, cultural shifts and changes in political will," said Andrew Romanoff, speaker of the Colorado House, who plans to introduce a measure incorporating a recommendation to increase offerings of early childhood education programs. "The report will provide the basis for our conversation."

The most controversial recommendations include empowering school districts to sign contracts with companies and teachers to run the schools -- which would replace schools' administrative structures with something similar to that in charter schools -- and forcing teachers to give up pensions in exchange for large pay increases.

Districts, they said, should relinquish control to the most highly qualified contractors, who would be

rewarded for successfully running schools -- or fired if student performance languishes.

The schools "would be like charter schools in one crucial respect: They would be highly entrepreneurial," said Marc Tucker, vice chairman of the commission and staff director and president of the National Center on Education and the Economy.

But Anne L. Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association, said hiring contractors to run the schools would create "a huge new set of enterprises that we have no evidence will work." Moreover, it would negate the administrative economies of scale provided by a central office and "add a great deal of costs to a school," she said. "We've seen that to an extent with charter schools."

Boosting teacher pay would draw better candidates to the profession, commission members said. They recommend that schools increase teacher pay by at least \$20,000 -- to \$45,000 for beginners and \$95,000 for experienced ones working a regular school calendar. Teachers who work year-round, they said, would be paid \$110,000.

Teachers would get the raises in exchange for giving up pensions and switching to 401(k) retirement plans.

Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association, agreed that teacher pay should be increased. However, "it is shortsighted to call for salary programs that increase teacher pay but deplete retirement benefits," he said in a statement.

The proposal also calls for:

? Setting up "personal competitiveness accounts" for all citizens to cover the cost of retraining if their jobs are phased out.

? Allowing students in vocational courses to graduate from high school after the 10th grade and enroll in trade schools or community colleges if they pass exams demonstrating academic competency. High-performing college-prep students would spend the 11th and 12th grades taking advanced courses and then, after graduation, enroll in college as sophomores and juniors.

Tucker said the recommendations would take 15 years to implement, but he predicted that they would result "in what will plausibly be the best national public school system in the world."

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