

Bad Choices Bring Bad Times:



Analyzing the NCEE's 2006 Report



by Steven Pittz, Research Associate
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Executive Summary

The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) convened a Commission aimed at revamping an educational system the NCEE deems incapable of preparing Americans for the competition of an increasingly globalized economy. The Commission's proposed educational redesign is found in its 2006 report *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. A review of the report shows that it would likely fail to meet many of the expectations it lays out for itself. The Commission believes that its proposed redesign would achieve eight objectives, but it appears unlikely to accomplish more than the following four:

- The most rigorous standards the nation has ever seen. The Commission proposes a State Board Qualifying Examination (SBQE) that could improve standards. But many problems accompany high-stakes exams, including the question of what should be tested.
- Real school finance equity. The Commission recommends a state-based pupil-weighted funding formula that would ensure all public schools receive equal funding for an equal number of students, with extra funding for at-risk students.
- The end of seniority rights and tenure for teachers. The Commission proposes a uniform salary schedule and new career ladder that would include performance-based pay. Teachers could increase career earnings in exchange for a more modest retirement.
- A clear role for unions. The Commission would grant unions power to bargain directly with the state, creating a monopoly collective bargaining organization at the state level.

The four objectives likely to be missed are:

- Real school autonomy. Despite the transformation of all public schools into contract schools, the considerable control granted to government over education precludes real school autonomy.

- The end of vouchers. Disagreement over core content and curricula promise to perpetuate the desire for private schooling and school vouchers.
- A public-school marketplace. A true marketplace is driven by the demands of consumers; but in this model, the most important consumers of education, students and their parents, are underrepresented, if not entirely neglected.
- The elimination of bureaucracy. With the introduction of state-approved school support "networks," regional competitiveness authorities (RCAs) and personal competitiveness accounts (PCAs), the model seems likely to replace existing bureaucracy with a new one.

The reason for the likely failure to meet so many of the NCEE's expectations is that the objectives are incomplete in themselves. By reducing the role of education to the provision of economic needs, the Commission clouds its vision of education as a whole. The NCEE's model resembles the German educational system, which emphasizes vocational training for some students at the expense of more academic training. This system puts the needs of the state above the needs of parents and students, and it trains workers more than it cultivates a well-rounded citizenry. But liberal education, which "seeks to develop free human beings who know how to use their minds and are capable of thinking for themselves," should be preeminent. In the rapidly changing environment of the 21st century, capable, independent persons who can adapt to changing circumstances are needed more than ever.

The NCEE's proposed redesign—which contains both good and bad ideas—should be approached with caution. Many of its recommendations, and its underlying educational philosophy, should be avoided entirely.

Introduction

The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) convened the commission that wrote the 2006 report titled *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. The Commission identified serious problems facing workers in the United States in the coming decades. Developing nations, led by China and India, are producing high-skilled workers who are willing to work for lower wages than their American counterparts. In a globalized economy, the engineer in Denver, Colorado, competes with the engineer in Bombay, India. With the number and quality of engineers in Bombay increasing, engineers in Denver are faced with the possibilities of losing their

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jobs or taking massive pay cuts to remain employed. The problem is very real, and the NCEE should be commended for working toward a solution.

The Commission's recommendations to address the problem by overhauling the education system,

however, should be heeded with caution. Some of its proposals should be embraced, but more should be avoided. The Commission's preoccupation with economic success clouds its vision of education as a whole. The cardinal sin committed by the NCEE is the subordination of education to the needs of the national economy. Moreover, it shifts the power to direct a child's education further away from parents and towards the government. A more restrained outlook is needed to ensure that our education system is not designed solely for the production of a proficient worker capable of serving the state, but for the cultivation of a well-rounded citizen.

This paper discusses the NCEE's vision for changing our education system. It examines many aspects of the proposed redesign to

question how likely the NCEE is to meet its objectives. The paper also questions the objectives of the NCEE's proposed model and its underlying educational philosophy. Akin to the German educational model, the Commission's proposal begins with the belief that government is better equipped to develop an educational system from the top down than are teachers, parents, and other professionals working from the bottom up.

The New Model

Forecasting 15 years into the future – in 2021 – the NCEE predicts that if all of its recommendations are followed American education would have achieved the following objectives:¹

- “the most rigorous standards the nation had ever seen”
- “real school finance equity”
- “the end of seniority rights [and tenure] for teachers”
- “a clear role for unions”
- “the end of the threat of vouchers”
- “real school autonomy”
- “real competition in a very competitive public school marketplace”
- elimination “of the bureaucracy”

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To meet these objectives, *Tough Choices or Tough Times* recommends enacting major changes, including the following:

- A State Board Qualifying Examination would test mastery of core content and direct each student's educational future: most students would be prepared for the exam by age 16
- All public schools would become independently operated and publicly funded “contract schools”
- A system of pupil-weighted funding would enable students to choose among contract schools

- Each school would be required to affiliate with a state-approved “network” that could provide assistance in program development, personnel training, and technical support
- New Regional Competitiveness Authorities (RCAs) would be responsible for coming up with development goals and strategies for their respective regions and for coordinating the region’s education and training institutions
- An emphasis on early childhood education would make high-quality pre-school available to all 4-year-olds and to all 3-year-olds from low-income families

Similar to the track system of many European educational systems, higher or lower scores on the SBQE would determine a student’s options for future education.

- Personal Competitiveness Accounts (PCAs) would provide a government subsidy for tuition, books, and fees at accredited post-secondary institutions for every child born in America
- A new career ladder would pay teachers based on performance with higher starting pay and more opportunity for salary increases, offset by less expensive pension plans
- Teachers’ unions would have the guaranteed role of state-level

bargaining agents that also have the right to organize contract school employees

The recommended changes would not yield many of the intended objectives, in addition to producing some other undesirable outcomes.

Exams, not just Seat Time

The cornerstone of the redesign is the creation of a State Board Qualifying Examination (SBQE). Aimed at reducing the “colossal inefficiency of the American education system,” these exams would be designed to measure whether students have mastered a particular curriculum.² The Commission recognized a stark contrast between the Ameri-

can system and the most successful systems, noting that “American students thought of themselves as putting in time in the successive stages of the system...whereas students in the most successful systems thought of themselves as studying for examinations.”³ The Commission therefore recommends an SBQE that would, for most students, be taken at the end of the 10th grade, or at age 16.⁴

The minimal standard for students passing the exam, according to the report, would be for entrance into community colleges in the state without the need for remedial coursework.⁵ There are, however, multiple “passing scores” set for different destinations. Similar to the track system of many European educational systems, higher or lower scores on the SBQE would determine a student’s options for future education. These options range from higher level academics to vocational or technical programs.⁶

Track systems have historically led to social stratification in Europe, with societies divided between white-collar workers who attended university and blue-collar workers who followed non-academic, vocational tracks. White-collar workers hold elite positions in government and the private sector, while blue-collar workers provide labor. The socioeconomic status of families tends to persist over the generations, with children likely to follow the same educational tracks as their parents.⁷

A track system based on exam scores is not exclusive to Europe. The growing number of engineers trained in China and India are oft-cited in the *Tough Choices or Tough Times* report. Yet the report does not mention the problems with education in China and India. The engineers from these countries are sub-

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jected to rigorous examination, and they represent a small minority of the educated populace. Those who attend elite universities are the elite in these societies. The social stratification evident in China and India is greater than in Europe.

Reliance on examinations poses a problem in and of itself. While examinations do provide a concrete measure of progress in some areas, they are not without their faults. Due to the high stakes of examinations of this type, they often produce “massive stress” and risk “further tracking students into pathways that may limit upward mobility.”⁸

The limitation of upward mobility can be seen vividly in China, where the number of students able to attend secondary and higher education is a fraction of the number of stu-

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dents who desire to attend. According to Bai Xuefeng, “Many farm boys have only two choices in their life: score very high in the entrance examination, get into college, find a job and become a citizen in the city; or they toil in the farm or become a low wage worker in some factory.”⁹ A high score on an entrance examination admits a student into a “key school” in China, which are government-run and garner the best teachers and resources.

The exams are highly difficult, and few are ultimately enrolled in key schools. Yan Danhua, editor of the Shanghai Middle School Students Journal claims: “If you are one of the top 10 students in your school, you may have a chance to be enrolled.”¹⁰

India provides a similar story, with the best schools admitting students based on examination marks. The engineers mentioned in the NCEE’s report hail largely from elite private universities known as the Indian Insti-

tutes of Technology (IITs). “It is likely that close to half the annual undergraduate output of the seven IITs...go abroad every year...it is estimated that there are some 25,000 IIT alumni in the U.S.”¹¹ IITs are among the best technical universities in the world, but they stand out in what is “an otherwise mediocre higher educational system.”¹² IITs are extremely competitive, accepting approximately 1 out of every 60 applicants.¹³ Psychological stress, largely due to immense pressure to succeed, has had a drastic impact on students taking entrance exams for highly selective schools, with denial of admission becoming a factor in India’s growing problem of suicide.¹⁴

In addition to stress and limited upward mobility, exams such as the proposed SBQE present another serious problem—the problem of what should be tested. There is much disagreement over what constitutes core content, and the creation of an SBQE magnifies the debate by raising the stakes.

With so much riding on a student’s performance on an exam, the ability of teachers and parents to veer from established curriculum in order to teach other desired subjects is vastly diminished. Rigorous SBQEs would provide a near guarantee that certain standards would be met by all college-bound students. Yet while high standards in all public schools are an important objective, the SBQE may strongly inhibit different kinds of education that parents demand. As the Commission acknowledges, during the first 10 years of education “the curriculum would be pretty much the same for all students, with some choices along the way.”¹⁵

An SBQE thus poses a challenge to autonomous formulation of curriculum. The need to

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ensure students' mastery of the content tested on the SBQE would preclude the inclusion of other subjects. The high stakes involved in an SBQE, with its large role in directing a student's educational future, would make it difficult for teachers to prepare students for anything outside of the test itself. In the end, the content tested on the SBQE would become core content. Yet the problem of disagreement over core content means that the SBQE would fail to appease everyone.

School Competition, Finance Equity, and Autonomy

The Commission's report predicts the new education system would put an end to the threat of vouchers in particular and of the privatization of schools in general. At the same time, it promises real school autonomy and competition in a public school marketplace. The Commission recommends that all public schools become "contract" schools, or schools operated by independent contractors.

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The idea of contract schools was introduced by Paul Hill, Lawrence Pierce, and James Guthrie in 1997.¹⁶

Contract schools would be funded directly by the state, and their progress would be monitored by the state via different mechanisms,

notably school boards and networks. The NCEE report states that contract schools "would have complete discretion over the way their funds are spent, the staffing schedule, their organization and management, their schedule, and their program, as long as they provided the curriculum and met the testing and other accountability requirements imposed by the state."¹⁷

A state-imposed curriculum likely would prevent any truly alternative schools from forming. For example, Montessori or schools

using the Core Knowledge Sequence might not be compatible with a state-imposed curriculum.¹⁸ Furthermore, contract schools' hiring would be limited to a selection of state-employed teachers. Therefore many promising private school operators may be discouraged from bidding to run contract schools.¹⁹

All public schools would be financed via a pupil-weighted funding formula. This method of funding is not entirely new; it is also known as Weighted Student Funding (WSF). WSF means that funding follows the child to whatever public school the child attends.²⁰ Per-student funding would vary according to the needs of the child, with at-risk children and others with unique circumstances receiving more. Special needs students also would be targeted with more funding for diagnostic services and intervention, including mentors and after-school programs.²¹ WSF has been successful in several cities, most notably in Edmonton, Alberta, where nearly 75 percent of schools are allocated money via a WSF distribution formula.²² Despite being a relatively new idea, WSF has proven to be capable of improving school finance equity.

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Because funding would come directly from the state and follow the student, school boards at the district level would also take on a new role. Freed of their financial responsibilities, district school boards would move away from school ownership to school supervision. Their primary task would be "to write performance contracts with the operators of these schools, monitor their operations, cancel or decide not to renew the contracts of those providers that did not perform well, and find others that could do better."²³ School district central offices would also be

responsible for collecting a wide range of statewide data and disseminating performance reports to the schools and the public, i.e. parents.

With this data, parents can then choose between *public* schools. The NCEE advocates pupil-weighted funding, but it does so provided the student attends a public school. In the eyes of the Commission, pupil-weighted funding would lead to competition and high standards in all schools as they vie for students and the money that comes with them. The Commission also believes that high standards and choice between public schools would eliminate the need for vouchers.

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The Commission refers to this as a “public school marketplace,” but with power concentrated at the state level a true market-oriented approach is absent. Choice for students and parents is confined to public schools run by the state, albeit with the district as an intermediary. In this model, school reform comes from the top down rather than the bottom up. A market-oriented, decentralized approach to

school reform would place the needs of students and their parents above the considerations of the state.

The Prevalence of State Power

The Commission’s placement of the needs of the state above those of parents and families can be seen elsewhere, as well. It suggests that “every school be required to be affiliated with a network approved by the state. The networks would be responsible for helping to shape the program, providing training, supplying regular technical assistance, and providing many other forms of support to the schools affiliated with them.”²⁴ Later on in the report, the Commission urges the state to

create “new arms to investigate, review, and approve—and terminate, if necessary—the right of organizations that wanted to operate networks to support public contract schools in the state.”²⁵ In short, the state requires that all schools join a “network” and reserves the right to dictate what such “networks” do.

This is hardly a decentralized free-market approach that responds to the demands of the consumer. Instead, it is a top-down, state-centered approach to educational reform aimed at providing for the needs of the national economy. The NCEE’s focus appears to be on the role of education, not as a means to the cultivation of a well-rounded person, but as a means to the success of the U.S. economy. The Commission observes that “there will be no success for the country unless we are among the top two in technology in every industry in which we hope to be a major player. That requires us to be among the very best performers in international comparisons of mathematics and science achievement.”²⁶

The emphasis on industry and economy is evident in the Commission’s encouragement of regional competitiveness authorities (RCAs). It recommends that “the federal government develop legislation to encourage the states to create regional economic development authorities involving the key leaders from many sectors in those regions in the development of economic development strategies that make sense to them.”²⁷ RCAs would “make sure that each region’s workers develop the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in that labor market.”²⁸

RCAs are a prime example of the NCEE’s preoccupation with economics. According to

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education analyst Diane Ravitch, the proposal of RCAs “sounds a bit like a Soviet five-year plan...[it] promises nothing but a layer of bureaucratic management to try to steer the economy, a strategy that has never worked in the past and is not likely to work in the future.”²⁹

While the goal of a healthy economy may be logical for the state, it does not necessarily mirror the primary interests of families. It also creates a system in which government-run education is accountable to government-

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run agencies, not to the taxpayers – parents – who place their trust in the educational system. It reflects the Commission’s belief that government knows best how to prepare children for the future, not parents.

The NCEE’s proposal for early childhood education also reflects its preference of uniform state education to parental guidance. Though it does not recommend that preschool be mandatory, it does recommend expansion. The Commission’s early learning proposal is “to serve every 4-year-old

interested in participating in a publicly supported, high-quality early learning program. The goal is to serve virtually all 4-year-olds and all the 3-year-old children who live in low-income households.”³⁰ The expansion of early childhood education is controversial due to its role in expanding state power. The earlier a child experiences the influences of state education, the less the parent is responsible for the education of the child.

Finally, the creation of Personal Competitiveness Accounts (PCAs) for every child in America also pulls economic power away from parents towards the state. With an ini-

tial U.S. governmental deposit of \$500 and continued contribution until a person reaches 16, this “GI Bill for our times” would supply account holders with money to pay for tuition, books and fees at any accredited institution.³¹ PCAs push students towards “any work-related program of study.” The NCEE claims that “no other step the nation could take will have a higher payoff in economic agility and competitiveness.”³²

Nevertheless, an individual’s educational future should be decided by the student and the family, not by government funding directed at certain “work-related” programs. Additionally, the creation of PCAs adds to an already bloated federal bureaucracy. The Commission envisions that for any person 16 or older, “under law, the federal government” would be “obliged to match the employees’ contributions if they earned less than twice the minimum wage.”³³ The size of a bureaucracy to process and fund such a large undertaking undermines the Commission’s claim that its proposal eliminates bureaucracy, and it threatens to raise the cost of higher education on the whole due to government subsidization.³⁴

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Real school autonomy, which the Commission claims the system would provide, implies the flexibility to develop curricula based on the philosophy of education to which a school subscribes. Oftentimes parents may desire to send their children to schools based on religious belief or a personal value system. The report neglects to discuss the fact that the creation of private schools, and the push for vouchers, has occurred in many cases from a desire to choose what is being taught in schools. Private schools may still be available to the rich, who can afford to send their children there with-

out vouchers. But low-income families do not have such a luxury, and hence are stuck in the public system. The NCEE sees no problem here. It deems state-imposed curriculum and accountability sufficient to appease all parents and students. Parents lose power while the state gains power.

New Status for Teachers in a Centralized Union

The NCEE further promises the new system would draw in better candidates to the teaching profession. A statewide salary schedule, paying at a level similar to top professions, and a performance-based career ladder would be implemented. Teachers would be employed directly by the state, but would be hired and fired by individual contract schools.³⁵ The NCEE also proposes a career ladder with a base salary and both yearly and

performance-based salary increases. Higher pay would lure better candidates into 10- or 12-month contracts, with an annual salary as high as \$110,000 for teachers with 12-month contracts.³⁶

The average base salary would be \$45,000, with an expectation for increases of about \$500 per year based on a “summative judgment of adequate progress.”³⁷ The career ladder,

however, would offer salary increases for advancement through four “tiers” with an overall worth of \$30,000 extra pay for a teacher who climbs through all four.³⁸ To pay for the increase in salaries, teachers would sacrifice some of their retirement benefits, but retirement plans would be “comparable to those of the better firms in the private sector.”³⁹ The proposed reform would switch teachers from a standard defined benefit plan to a portable defined contribution plan, based on the recognition that today’s young professionals make more frequent career changes.⁴⁰

On top of a new salary schedule, the Commission recommends it would be time for “teachers to work under the same conditions as most professionals.”⁴¹ This recommendation would mean the end of tenure and seniority rights that make it easy for ineffective teachers to stay in the system. The decrease in job protection would be offset by opportunities for advancement based on performance.

The Commission proposes that “a variety of criteria—including advanced preparation and classroom evaluation—could influence the advancement in rank.”⁴² Yet while the technical details of teacher advancement may be left unclear by the report, the message is not. By discarding the traditional salary schedule, the new system would signal the beginning of widespread performance-based pay. Such a step is needed if teachers are to be recruited from the top-third of college bound high school students. As the Commission warns, the reality is that “we are now recruiting more of our teachers from the bottom third of the high school students going to college than is wise.”⁴³

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While the extension of performance based-pay for teachers is a step in the right direction, the Commission’s vision for the future of teachers unions is not. In the future “scenario” in 2021, “the unions had won the right to organize the contract schools in [some] states, which were now all the public schools in [those states].”⁴⁴

The report predicts that in the future scenario “some states were recognizing the unions as the state’s partner in the bargaining process.”⁴⁵ Such a development would be cause for concern, as the existence of one large, monopoly

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The report recommends that all teachers be employed, and approved, by the state, rather than by local districts. As one analysis of the report observed, this change would “make it easier than it is today for the union to organize [teachers] and ensure that there is 100% unionization.”⁴⁶ All teachers would be pressured to pay tribute to the union in order to have any voice in the bargaining process, because the union would bargain directly and exclusively with the state. Union members who valued their local union but did not fully support the agenda of the state or national union could be disenfranchised by state level collective bargaining.

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As mentioned above, independent contractors would operate contract schools in this model, and the NCEE foresees many of them as “limited liability corporations owned and run by teachers.”⁴⁷ These organizations will be re-

sponsible for how the school’s money will be spent, what the curriculum will be, what teaching methods and materials will be used, how to involve parents, how the school will be organized and managed, etc.⁴⁸ Unions, along with education colleges and entrepreneurs, also would be able to create state-approved network organizations. Each school will be required to be affiliated with a network that can provide staff training, program development, and “regular technical assistance.”⁴⁹

If unions further bid to run individual contract schools, which the report leaves open as a possibility, there is little left to check their power over the whole educational system.

The new role of elected school board members to supervise schools and to monitor their progress, including the task of sending school performance reports to parents, theoretically acts as a balance to union power.

Yet practice is of great import in such a system. The performance reports going from the school boards to parents – which are the parents’ only measure of school quality provided in the NCEE’s proposed system – must be thorough and reliable. In addition, the influence of the teachers union on the elections of school board members, which some have observed to be dominant enough to decide elections, must be monitored.⁵⁰ Only the school board can act as a disinterested judge of a school’s performance, and in the Commission’s proposed model only the school board’s judgment could check the already powerful union.

After the implementation of the Commission’s proposals, the union would be more centralized than it is presently.

The German System

The educational redesign proposed in *Tough Choices or Tough Times* resembles the model used by several European nations. This system finds its origins in 18th century Germany, where state power dominated local interests. Students are trained to be skilled workers that can service the state economy.

Education in 18th century Germany became cost-free and compulsory, and it was controlled by the state. The state determined what to teach and how to teach it. Primary education began as an education in reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as ethics, duty, discipline, and obedience. The skills

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taught were aimed at readying students for the workforce. By 1812 opportunities for secondary and postsecondary education were available, but these were also controlled at the state level.

The system persists today, as “the Lander (state) ministries determine the curriculum, recommend teaching methods and approve textbooks.”⁵¹ German students are placed into either an academic or a non-academic track, with the decision coming when the student is around 12 years old, or in 5th or 6th

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grade.⁵² Students in the academic track must take the *Arbitur*, a state entrance exam that determines the students’ options for further study. Students in non-academic tracks are not prepared for the *Arbitur*, which is required for any student seeking admission to university. Non-academic tracks are aimed at preparing students for vocational training in apprenticeships in their

future professions. About 70 percent of German youth proceed through an apprenticeship system, which is the major provider of vocational skills.⁵³

The model proposed in *Tough Choices or Tough Times* also emphasizes vocational skills. Following the German system, students in the NCEE’s new system would be placed into academic and non-academic tracks based on exam scores. The belief in a need for vocational training is evident in the NCEE’s mission statement. The NCEE describes itself as an organization “created to develop proposals for building the world-class education and training system that the United States must have if it is to continue to be a world-class economy.”⁵⁴

A healthy economy is undoubtedly one of the primary concerns of any nation, and an

educated workforce is an essential ingredient of a healthy economy. But preparing people for a vocation is not the only goal of education. Tying education to the needs of the economy is a narrow approach that limits the full potential of those being educated. A fuller conception of the role of education is needed if the United States is to continue as the model, vibrant democracy that it is today.

Liberal Education

Liberal education has come to be synonymous with a liberal-arts education. The word “liberal” is derived from the Latin *liber*, meaning “free.” The proper meaning of “liberal arts” is “the arts becoming to a free man.”⁵⁵ The liberal arts curriculum dates back to the Middle Ages, when it included grammar, rhetoric, logic, music, geometry, arithmetic and astronomy. The broad curriculum was aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities, in contrast to a professional, vocational, or technical curriculum.

The educated free man is capable of thinking for himself and adapting in the face of new challenges.

The need for liberal education has not diminished over the centuries. The educated free man is capable of thinking for himself and adapting in the face of new challenges. Many in the field of education agree that the rapidly changing environment of the 21st century requires that students become adaptable, lifelong learners capable of succeeding in this environment.⁵⁶ Technical and professional skills do not fill the toolbox of an adaptable human. The need for liberal education is, in fact, greater than ever.

Whereas the ultimate goal of the NCEE’s educational redesign is the production of successful contributors to the economy, the finished product of a liberal education is, according to Leo Strauss, “a cultured human

being.”⁵⁷ Strauss argues that the cultivation of the native faculties of the mind produces a cultured human being, a human being who has “a unified view of nature and of man’s place in it.”⁵⁸ It is through a unified view of nature that we can understand how the various academic disciplines interact and fit together, and begin the debate on how to structure an educational system.

Choosing what is to be taught is an ever-existing problem for educators. The liberal arts curriculum of the Middle Ages may not be ideal for 2007, but today’s liberal education still emphasizes breadth over depth. It stresses an understanding of what role the various professions fill in a larger whole. Professional training is left to the professionals; educators focus on providing a fuller understanding of how human society functions, from politics to economics to the role of the sciences.

The technician knows only how to do the work he does; the liberally educated person also knows why.

Mortimer Adler argues that the best liberal education “must include all the humanities as well as mathematics and the sciences. It must exclude all merely vocational and technical training.”⁵⁹ It is important to note, however, that liberal education does not exclude all vocational and technical education, just education that is *merely* vocational and technical. The technician knows only how to do the work he does; the liberally educated person also knows why.

The NCEE’s report does give the arts and humanities token representation. They are mentioned on two occasions, but the focus quickly shifts back to math, science and technology. It is clear that the Commission is intent on producing technicians, not free, independent humans that are the result of liberal education.

The importance of liberal education was not lost on the American founders. Commenting on compulsory education in his *Thoughts on Government* in 1776, John Adams wrote: “Laws for the liberal education of youth, especially of the lower class of people, are so extremely wise and useful, that, to a humane and generous mind, no expense for this purpose would be thought extravagant.”⁶⁰

Adams’ sentiments were shared by two other American giants, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Indeed, Jefferson was an ardent advocate of liberal education, drafting a “Bill for the General Diffusion of Knowledge” and designing a liberal arts curriculum for the education of his nephew.⁶¹ In their attempts to design an American education system, “all three assigned the paramount role to liberal education.”⁶²

To the founders, liberal education was essential to the maintenance of democracy. Democratic men are free to form, and are responsible for, their own opinions on myriad issues that are decided by their votes. The political independence granted by democracy carries with it the necessity of independent thinking. The founders believed democracy to be self-government, government by and for free men.

The very idea of liberal education is the education necessary for a free man. In addition to having the freedom to self-govern, citizens in a democracy must be capable of governing themselves. Democracy requires a society “in which all or most adults have developed their reason to a high degree.”⁶³ Liberal education is needed to produce such a society.

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The educational philosophy that underpins the NCEE's report neglects the importance of liberal education in a democracy. The preparation and training of citizens for the workforce is an important role of education. However, vocational training should not be the primary goal of education. A liberal education, by contrast, "seeks to develop free human beings who know how to use their minds and are able to think for themselves. Its primary aim is not the development of professional competence, although a liberal education is indispensable for any intellectual profession. It produces citizens who can exercise their political liberty responsibly...It is an education for all free men, whether they intend to be scientists or not."⁶⁴

Conclusion

NCEE's educational redesign proposes a brave step towards fundamental educational change. It contains both good and bad recommendations, yet the bad outweigh the good. When we examine their recommendations, it is important to keep the NCEE's underlying educational philosophy in mind. Which brings back the question: Is the model proposed in this report capable of making good on its promised objectives?

The educational philosophy that underpins the NCEE's report neglects the importance of liberal education in a democracy.

First, the creation of a State Board Qualifying Examination would have the potential to improve standards by increasing a student's accountability. But even if it were to yield **the most rigorous standards the nation has ever seen**, the use of SBQE scores to track students would not respect the myriad needs of students and parents alike.

Second, the promise of **real school finance equity** would be made possible by the implementation of pupil-weighted funding: The money follows the child. This type of fund-

ing has enjoyed success in some districts, especially in Edmonton, Alberta.

Third, the promise of **the end of seniority rights and tenure for teachers** would be delivered by the implementation of a new career ladder. The widespread adoption of performance-based pay would be a welcome change likely to improve the quality of teachers. However, state employment likely would increase the pressure of unionization on individual teachers.

Fourth, the promise of **a clear role for unions** would establish teachers unions as state-level bargaining agents, while also allowing them to operate contract schools and support networks. This arrangement would further strengthen unions at the expense of education consumers. Responsibility would be taken away from parents and placed in the hands of union leaders and bureaucrats.

Fifth, the promise of **the end of the threat of school vouchers** underestimates what is perceived to be at stake by the proponents of vouchers. Even if things were to progress as the report portends, division over what content should be taught – regardless of how well it were taught – would remain to perpetuate support for private schooling and vouchers.

Sixth, the promise of **real school autonomy** would be undermined by an increase in state control. The creation of contract schools funded by the state may improve standards and grant some flexibility to school organizers within a specified realm, but the state government's considerable control over curriculum and personnel decisions would preclude real school autonomy.

The widespread adoption of performance-based pay would be a welcome change... However, state employment likely would increase the pressure of unionization on individual teachers.

Seventh, the Commission's claim that its model is a "**public school marketplace**" is misleading. A true marketplace is driven by the demands of consumers. In this model, the most important consumers of education, students and their parents, would be under-represented, if not entirely neglected.

Finally, while the proposed model would streamline the process of organizing schools, **eliminating some of the current bureaucracy**, a new bureaucracy would take its place.

Pupil-weighted funding and performance pay for teachers, for example, are much-needed reforms that should be embraced.

State-approved school support "networks," state curriculum, Personal Competitiveness Accounts and Regional Competitiveness Authorities, for example, all would produce more bureaucracy. Moreover, the creation of PCAs and RCAs would continue to steer educational change in the direction of producing a labor force to serve the economy. RCAs would resemble bureaucratic authorities found

in centralized economies. They would not be philosophically aligned with capitalist democracies.

After closer inspection, the model proposed in the NCEE's *Tough Choices or Tough Times*

report appears likely to fall short of its own lofty expectations. The report is not without value, though. It is always easier to criticize than to create. Some of the Commission's recommendations appear likely to fulfill their expectations. Pupil-weighted funding and performance pay for teachers, for example, are much-needed reforms that should be embraced. The proposal of an SBQE is also a good springboard to discussion surrounding successful assessments and more student accountability. But the Commission's assertion that their redesign would create a better education system misses the mark, as it marginalizes the role of parents and strengthens the hand of the state.

The NCEE's proposal goes astray because the goals it sets are incomplete in themselves. Its marriage of education to the economy narrows its vision of education as a whole.

The production of economically viable citizens is an integral part of any education, but it is only a part. Education should rightly aim for citizens who possess, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, "a knowing head, and an honest heart."⁶⁵

But the Commission's assertion that their redesign would create a better education system misses the mark, as it marginalizes the role of parents and strengthens the hand of the state.

Notes

¹ National Center on Education and the Economy, *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*, (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2007), p. 95.

² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XXI.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. XXI-XXII.

⁶ For an illustration of the proposed system, see the flow chart in *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, p. 53.

⁷ Richard Breen, "Social Mobility in Europe." Part of the "National Patterns of Social Mobility: Convergence or Divergence?" project (European University Institute, Florence, and Nuffield College, Oxford: 2004), pp. 18-20.

⁸ National Association for College Admission Counseling, "NACAC Response: NCEE's 'Tough Choices or Tough Times' Report," December 16, 2006,

<http://www.nacacnet.org/NR/rdonlyres/E6B4538B-7014-40AF-BBEF-507C7B078F5D/0/ResponsetoNCEEReport.pdf>

⁹ Quoted from email to the author from Bai Xuefeng. Bai is a Ph.D. candidate at Xiamen University and attended key schools from primary through postsecondary education.

¹⁰ *China's Elite Education Makes Children Suffer Somewhat*, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/Life/137096.htm>

¹¹ Kanta Murali, *The IIT Story: Issues and Concerns*, Frontline Essay Vol. 20, Iss. 03, <http://flonnet.com/fl2003/stories/20030214007506500.htm>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Rukmini Shrinivasan & Hemali Chhappia, "3 lakh students to vie for IIT entry this year," *The Times of India*: 31 March 2006, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1471784.cms>

¹⁴ Ramachandra Guha, *The Sociology of Suicide*, India Together, August 2004, <http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/aug/rgh-suicide.htm>

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¹⁶ Paul T. Hill, Lawrence C. Pierce, and James W. Guthrie, *Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America's Schools*, (University of Chicago Press: 1997).

¹⁷ *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, p. XXVII.

¹⁸ The Core Knowledge Sequence, developed by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., is a solid, specific, sequential, and shared curriculum that seeks to provide strong foundations of knowledge and cultural literacy for students in pre-school through eighth grade.

¹⁹ "Tough Choices, Tough Times...or Tough Luck: Leaving the Bottom 5% of Children Behind," *The Fund for Colorado's Future*, Education Brief, August 2007, No.1.

²⁰ See *Fund the Child: Tackling Inequity and Antiquity in School Finance*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, June 2006, <http://www.100percentsolution.org/fundthechild/FundtheChild062706.pdf>

²¹ *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, pp. 115-117.

²² Jeff Archer, "An Edmonton Journey," *Education Week*, January 26, 2005; Timothy R. DeRoche, Bruce S. Cooper, Wouldiam G. Ouchi and Lydia G. Segal, "Models of School-Site Funding: Analysis of Weighted Student Formula in Urban Schools," December 16, 2003; Jerome G. Delaney, "The Development of School-Based Management in the Edmonton Public School District," Fall 1995. Available online: <http://www.mun.ca/educ/faculty/mwatch/vol1/delaney.html>

²³ *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, p. XXVII.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. XXXI.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Ravitch, Diane, "'Tough Choices': Radical Ideas, Misguided Assumptions," *Education Week*, Vol. 26, Iss. 19, January 2007.

³⁰ *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, p. 113.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. XXX.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁴ Many economists have noted that subsidies tend to raise prices on goods. As a larger amount of money (due to the subsidy) is available to buy an unchanging amount of a good (in this case higher education), the price of the good rises. See Thomas Sowell, *Basic Economics: A Citizen's Guide to the Economy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

³⁵ *Tough Choices or Tough Times.*, p. XXIV, p. 134.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. XXII, p. 104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁸ *Ibid.* For a more detailed look at how the career ladder operates, see Table 2, p. 103.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. XXIV.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. XXIII.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ "Tough Choices, Tough Times...or Tough Luck," p. 4.

⁴⁷ *Tough Choices or Tough Times.*, p. XXVII.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵⁰ See Terry M. Moe, "Teachers Unions and School Board Politics," in *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*, ed. Wouldiam G. Howell (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Eurydice, "National summary sheets on education systems in Europe and ongoing reforms," 2007 Edition, http://www.eurydice.org/ressources/eurydice/pdf/047DN/047_DE_EN.pdf

⁵² For a more thorough explanation of the German track systems with visuals, see http://www.eduserver.de/zeigen_e.html?seite=411 and <http://www.kmk.org/doku/en-2006.pdf>

⁵³ Karin Wagner, *The German Apprenticeship System after Unification*, (The Social Science Research Center of Berlin: January 1998).

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⁵⁶ See, for example, the Council on 21st Century Learning's *Framework for 21st Century Learning* at <http://www.C21L.org>

⁵⁷ Leo Strauss, *What is Liberal Education?* From an address delivered at the Tenth Annual Graduation Exercises of the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults, June 6, 1959, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1987), p. 347.

⁵⁹ Mortimer Adler, "What is Liberal Education?", <http://www.ditext.com/adler/wle.html>

⁶⁰ Quoted in A. Whitney Griswold, *Liberal Education and the Democratic Ideal*, (Yale University Press, 1959), p. 2.

⁶¹ Thomas H. Winn, "Jefferson and his Friends on the Civic Purpose of Liberal Education," *Studies in Liberal Education*, (July 2003),

<http://sle.lib.apsu.edu/03SprWinn.html>

⁶² Griswold, p. 3.

⁶³ Strauss, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Adler, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Winn, p. 4.

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JON CALDARA is President of the Independence Institute.

DAVID KOPEL is Research Director of the Independence Institute.

PAMELA BENIGNO is Director of the Education Policy Center.

STEVEN PITZ is a Research Associate for the Education Policy Center. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Political Theory and International Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. A long-time Colorado resident, he received his B.A. in Political Science from the University of Colorado and spent a year substitute teaching at Colorado Springs District 11 high schools.

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