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Leading U.S. Policy Center's 'Message to America' Warns Time Is Running Out to Get Nation's Schools on Track to Compete With World's Best-Performing Education Systems

NCEE Points to Five Decades of Failure That Threatens U.S. Economy, Social Stability and Democracy; Calls Maryland's Just Enacted Reforms a Model for U.S. States

WASHINGTON, D.C.—In a strongly worded “Message to America,” the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) today warned the nation’s governors, state legislators and public-at-large that the U.S. is about to reap the economic and political consequences of its failure over the last 50 years to match the performance of the growing number of countries that are out-educating the United States.

At the same time, according to NCEE, state elected officials—who must be the main drivers for change in our federalist system—have a “shining” new model from the state of Maryland that they can now emulate and tackle comprehensive, system-wide education reform that benefits all students.

Before a meeting of policymakers today at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Marc Tucker, founder and president emeritus of NCEE, pointed out that the U.S. had the best educated workforce in the world in the 1970s but now ties for having the worst-educated workforce in the industrialized world, an astonishing decline. According to Tucker, the performance of U.S. high school students has not changed over that period, but one nation after another has come up even with, and then surpassed the U.S. Furthermore, the average U.S. high school student graduates two-and-a-half years behind their peers in the top-performing countries, and the U.S. trails 24 other countries in reading, science and math.

“The threat this poses to the U.S. is existential. Countries—most of whose citizens used to be illiterate—are now producing many millions of workers around the world who are as well educated as half or more of our citizens and willing to work for much less,” Tucker said. He added that half the jobs in the U.S. economy could be done by robots that are available today, and the robots are cheaper and more capable with every passing day.

“Put these two facts together and one can see a future of growing unemployment and spreading low wages in our country if something is not done to match the education performance of the top-performing systems,” said Tucker.

With the 2020 U.S. election cycle taking shape, NCEE also issued today’s “Message” as a clarion call to candidates at all levels. In the report, NCEE noted that education has not been at the top of the agenda for presidential candidates. “It must be at the top of the agenda. We must meet the challenges in this arena laid down by those who are now far

ahead of the U.S. Little else that we do will matter, because we will not have the highly-educated citizenry we need to chart our course, and lead fulfilling lives. Failure to do so will mean we will have sown the seeds of resentment, discord and struggle for growing numbers of our children and fellow citizens," said Tucker and Betsy Brown Ruzzi, co-authors of "Message to America."

Is No One Paying Attention?

Despite years of warnings, no state, until this year, has done the obvious: study the countries with the best education systems to figure out how they got so far ahead and then build a new system on the same principles. But that, says Tucker, is exactly what the State of Maryland has now done with sweeping education reforms that passed the legislature this spring.

"The Blueprint for Maryland's Future" is a product of extensive research and public input driven by the Kirwan Commission, said Tucker. "It is a coherent, powerful redesign of the whole education system, a shining new model based on the principles underlying the design of the most successful systems in the world, to match those systems in achievement, equity and efficiency."

Anthony Mackay, NCEE president and a global expert on high-performing schools, said, "The U.S. can continue to watch its education programs implode and place at risk millions of younger Americans who will not be able to compete with their peers around the world OR we can heed this 'all points bulletin' and hope that governors, legislators and the public will rise up and follow the course that Maryland is taking. This is something that can be done. It's not an impossible dream."

Tucker noted, "Silver bullet solutions in education must become a thing of the past. They do not deliver across-the-board results. What we just saw in Maryland is the antithesis of a silver bullet solution. Its purpose is to build a world-class, 21st century education system to meet the 21st century needs of our workforce and citizenry."

The Maryland blueprint coming out of the Kirwan Commission, named for its chairman, William "Brit" Kirwan, the former chancellor of the University System of Maryland, was charged with developing "new policies, implementation strategies, and updated funding formulas with a strong accountability system to enable *all* Maryland schools—and schoolchildren—to perform at the level of the world's top education systems," as the Commission's report states. The Maryland Blueprint becomes law on July 1 and will initially direct just under \$1 billion in extra state spending to public schools over the next two years.

With the support of NCEE, the Commission examined the policies and practices of the top-performing systems to see how they attained high levels of achievement and equity and how those policies and practices can be adapted to Maryland's context. To assist the Commission, NCEE prepared a "gap analysis" that showed how Maryland's system compared with those of the top-performing systems on a set of policies NCEE has identified as the "[9 building blocks for a world-class education system](#)."

The Commission found that, despite Maryland's reputation as a successful education system, the state's students actually performed at the middle of the pack among U.S. states, and the U.S. performed at middling levels on international assessments of student learning. As the report notes, "These data forced the Commission to face the inescapable truth: when it comes to student learning, Maryland schools perform at a mediocre level in a country that performs at a mediocre level internationally."

Moreover, the Commission found, the state has "glaring gaps in achievement" based on race and income. The state also suffers from teacher shortages, and its funding formula is regressive and unfair to poor communities.

Five Guiding Principles of New Maryland Reforms

To transform the state's system into a world-class system, the Commission recommended a series of steps in five areas:

1. *Investing in high-quality early childhood education and care.* The top performers spend much more than the United States on support for families with young children. The Commission proposed a major expansion of pre-school education and child care and a wide range of wrap-around services for low-income families, including improved access to social services, health services, juvenile justice services and other forms of support for homeless children, low-income children, children in trauma and other children who often spend less time in school than other children because they lack the support those children have outside of school.
2. *Elevating teachers and school leaders.* Top-performing countries put enormous emphasis on teacher quality. The Commission proposed providing strong incentives for a diverse array of high-performing graduating high school students to choose a career in teaching if they commit to serving in schools serving low-income students; raising standards for licensing teachers, increasing teacher compensation to that of high status professionals requiring the same level of education; offering real careers in teaching; and improving teachers' working conditions.
3. *Creating a world-class instructional system.* Top-performing countries build demanding curriculums set to high standards. The Commission proposed an internationally benchmarked curriculum that enables most students to achieve "college- and career-ready" status by the end of 10th grade—not 12th grade—and then pursue high-opportunity pathways that lead to rewarding careers, including careers that do not require a college education, with a whole new career and technical education system design.
4. *Providing more support to students who need it the most.* Top-performing countries guarantee that students who need extra help receive it so they can then achieve at high levels. The Commission proposed a broad range of such supports, from extra financial support for schools serving students who live in concentrated poverty to more support for special education students to extra teachers for students in school with a lot of low-income children to more time for teachers to tutor students who need individual assistance.

5. *Ensuring excellence for all.* Top-performing countries have systems in which everyone knows where the buck stops. The Commission proposed an accountability-oversight board that has the authority to ensure that the Commission's recommendations are successfully implemented and produce the desired results.

NCEE 'Message to America': The Way U.S. Structures Education Means States Must Be in the Driver's Seat— With Support from Feds

NCEE, in its "Message to America," made it clear that it regards the Maryland plan as a plan for state action, not federal government action. "Our states," Tucker said, "have the constitutional right and responsibility to run their own systems. The clock is ticking, and it's clear that if states want to match the performance of top-performing countries, there is nothing that stops them."

But he also noted that the federal government has a role to play in turning around the "sinking ship" of public education. States that come up with plans like Maryland's should be granted waivers from federal laws and regulations that interfere with their implementation, except for civil rights laws.

Additionally, the federal government should create a fund providing substantial financial support for states to plan and then implement plans of the kind that Maryland has produced. It should provide funds to conduct research that can assist states who want to follow in Maryland's steps and also to evaluate their efforts, providing feedback that can be useful to those states in coming up with the most effective plans and implementation designs. Furthermore, the federal government should support research and help make available ongoing data and information around international benchmarking research on the world's top-performing systems, so that the U.S. can be sure that its states are familiar with global best practices as they evolve.

"The real work has to unfold on the state level and what Maryland just accomplished can provide our other states a great template to work with," Tucker said.

'Message' Also Slams Silver Bullet Solutions That Have Not Delivered Results

NCEE pointed out that student performance has been absolutely flat for more than 40 years, while the per-student cost of educating the typical U.S. elementary and secondary student has more than doubled in real dollars. "What this really means is that all the much-hailed, silver bullet solutions have failed, including, lower class size, choice and charters, instructional technology, test-based teacher accountability and others," said Tucker.

He continued, "These silver bullet solutions have produced nothing but innovation fatigue among teachers and school leaders as one flavor of the week has been replaced with another, but all are still around, like ghosts in the school closet."

"The basic design of the typical state and local school system is essentially unchanged over the last 100 years," Tucker said, "and that design differs significantly from the much more effective education systems operating in top-performing nations where much more

attention is paid to the careful design of overall systems so that the parts and pieces work in harmony with each other, instead of in conflict with each other, as is so often the case in our systems.”

How States Can Get Started

In the NCEE “Message to America,” the report lays out critical steps that states can take to get started. Each state, one by one, needs to:

1. Create a body of leading citizens, broadly representative of the major stakeholders, but containing a critical mass of policymakers and highly-regarded private citizens. Charge it with studying what it will take for the state to match the achievements of the countries with the world’s best education systems and then coming back to the Governor, legislature and the public-at-large with specific proposals for the redesign of the state education system for the highest performance possible.
2. Get competent assistance to benchmark the performance of the national and global top performers; go visit them if you can; get their testimony if you can’t; study them until you think you really understand how they got where they are.
3. Compare the policies and practices of the top performers to your own policies and practices in unflinching detail, using a conceptual framework that makes such comparisons meaningful and increases the likelihood that you are looking at what is really important.
4. Disseminate information about the gap analysis widely in your state; get expert, professional and public reactions to it—as many as possible. Make sure the discussion includes both the goals as well as the means for achieving them.
5. Decide how you would use what you have learned to adapt the principles on which the benchmark systems are based to your state’s own needs, culture, institutional settings, and most importantly, your goals.
6. Lay that out as a provisional multi-year plan, for the whole period required, to bring the new system into being, with goals, measures, benchmarks, timelines and so on.
7. Cost out your plan, agree on a plan you think your state can afford, and then sell it statewide.

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The National Center on Education and the Economy was created in 1988 to analyze the implications of changes in the international economy for American education, formulate an agenda for American education based on that analysis and seek wherever possible to accomplish that agenda through policy change and development of the resources educators would need to carry it out. For more information visit www.ncee.org.