

Organization Trends

'School-to-Work'

NCEE Pursues Flawed Education Reform

by Virginia Miller

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Matthew Roemer (son of Rep. Tim Roemer, D-IN) seemed justifiably worried when President Clinton signed the Workforce Investment Partnership Act last August. The law implements several aspects of NCEE's misguided "school-to-work" reform.

This century has seen American education awash in faddish reforms, particularly in the last decade. Open classrooms, new math, whole language, outcome-based education, cooperative learning and other reforms have American education wallowing in mediocrity. Today many students graduate from high school without the necessary literacy or math skills to perform college-level work or function on the job.

Recently released Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores bear witness to our nation's failure to educate its youth. The 1998 average SAT mathematics score is heralded as the highest in 27 years, yet it still does not approach the performance level of the early 1960s. The average SAT verbal score remains flat and is just six points above the record lows of 1991 and 1994.

It has been estimated that textbooks have been "dumbed down" by two grade levels since World War II. A sixth-grade text in 1940 assumed that readers had a

vocabulary of 25,000 words. In comparison, a sixth-grade text in 1990 assumed a vocabulary of only 10,000 words.

Confronting continuing failure, today's reformers simply redefine the problem to avoid the cause of our educational decline: schools' failure to teach even the most basic academics.

One reform gimmick that has found significant favor — due in large part to support from the Clinton administration — is called "school-to-work." School-to-work advocates do not define education in traditional terms of liberal arts learning that maximizes individual potential and intellectual development. Rather, they have redefined education as training for economic productivity.

Certainly, career success is an important consequence of a good education, but school-to-work elevates workplace skills above learning. Schools' primary task is no longer to help children develop the habits of thought needed to master all aspects of life, including work, citizenship

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and family and spiritual life.

Furthermore, school-to-work is a tool for those who want increased regulation and central management of the economy. Because school-to-work would harm the free market system it claims to serve, both workers and employers would be hurt by its adoption.

The leading nonprofit advocate for school-to-work is the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), based in Rochester, New York. NCEE's president is Marc Tucker, who has been called the most influential man in American education today. Besides his NCEE work, Tucker serves on the National Skill Standards Board, a congressionally mandated commission to promote the development of national skills standards for schools.

Since Tucker founded NCEE in 1988, he has received about \$20 million in grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The Carnegie Corporation of New York also gave NCEE two-year grants of \$600,000 in 1994 and 1996.

But NCEE's success is explained by more than foundation money. Tucker is rich in influential contacts.

A longtime adviser to Bill Clinton, Tucker's relationship dates back to Clinton's days in Arkansas. As a consultant to the then-Governor, Tucker helped develop the original six national education goals presented at the 1989 education summit at Charlottesville, Virginia. The result was Goals 2000, which became the cornerstone of the Clinton administration's education agenda.

Tucker's relationship to Hillary Rodham Clinton is perhaps his greatest source of influence. The First Lady was a member of the NCEE board of trustees and remained on the board until her husband's first presidential campaign. While a trustee, Mrs. Clinton directed NCEE's efforts to implement the recommendations of Tucker's manifesto, *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* She met with business, labor and education leaders and helped draft model legislation to implement its recommendations.

Just days after Bill Clinton's 1992 election, Tucker penned a congratulatory letter to Hillary in which he outlined the details of a school-to-work system and a

proposed legislative agenda, including national education goals and testing. He urged the President and First Lady to remold the entire American system of education and training according to his ideas.

Advocates of the liberal arts, like former National Endowment for the Humanities chair Lynne Cheney, are justifiably nervous about NCEE's clout. "Mr. Tucker's letter [to Hillary Clinton] offers vivid support to those who worry that the Clinton [efforts for national testing] are merely the first step on a path toward central control of all aspects of education," Cheney wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1997.

Market Puppetry

Understanding Tucker's vision for education and the American economy is essential to understanding the potential impact of NCEE's proposed policies, which are embraced by the Clinton administration. If successful, NCEE and the federal government could reshape American life.

Tucker argues that fundamental changes occurring in the nature of work today — the globalization of commerce and the explosive growth of technology on the job — require a systemic change in our educational system so that our children will be productive workers in the 21st century's global economy. The economy of the future demands a new kind of education, one that explicitly links learning to earning.

Tucker insists that America has lost her competitive edge, and our best hope for restoring that edge lies in the "third industrial revolution." Henry Ford-style mass production and Taylorized assembly lines are obsolete. Instead, "high-performance" work organizations — where decision making is driven by the front-line worker — are necessary to compete in the 21st century's global economy. Such organizations must be built around highly trained workers. Tucker argues that educators must partner with business to ensure that the skills taught in schools are those most needed in the workplace and that students are prepared for the jobs of tomorrow.

On page 34 of Tucker's influential work *America's Choice*, there is an ominous graphic. It depicts the "Old Work Organization" with six frontline workers supported by 18 "indirect" workers. The "New

Work Organization" graphic depicts eight outline workers supported by six "indirect" workers. In Tucker's high-performance workplace, 40 percent of the workers disappear.

The Xerox company is held out by Tucker as one example of a major business embracing the "high-performance" model of organization.

"Between 1981 and 1983, the [Xerox] work force of 117,000 worldwide had been trimmed by 16,000 for a cost savings of \$600 million a year," write Tucker and his co-author Ray Marshall in *Thinking for a Living: Education and the Wealth of Nations* (1993). "Most of the cuts had come

NCEE is the organizational apparatus to accomplish the education phase of Tucker's grand design. Revealingly, Tucker refers to NCEE's school-to-work proposal as a "human resource development plan."

"Skills certification" is central to the school-to-work system. All students but the most severely handicapped would be required to reach an initial certificate standard, the Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM), in order to qualify for further education or training. Students would be awarded a CIM after achieving specific workplace competencies. Most students would be expected to achieve the CIM by

transformed into occupationally relevant curricula? Consider these examples of applied learning or contextual learning:

- A New York middle school math-relevance curriculum where "students visit local car dealerships.... After visiting the local car dealerships, students determine the average cost of cars with similar features. In groups of four, students are asked to investigate and compare the cost of basic cars with standard options and with specific option packages preset by the teacher. Students look into vans, small pick-ups, full size pick-ups and sport cars. Each group, given a set amount of money to spend, presents the best car for the money allowed and justifies their choice to the class..." (cited from the *New York State School-to-Work Best Practices Guide* at <http://www.nysed.gov/workforce/stwbp.html>).

- An Ohio mentor-training program where students learn the basic fundamentals of basketmaking. The purpose, according to the Longaberger Company's "Mentor Training Program Brochure," is "to provide high school seniors the opportunity to experience a manufacturing work environment while learning the basic fundamentals of the basketmaking craft."

- A proposed kindergarten curriculum in Pennsylvania's Pine-Richland School District, where the children spend time on an assembly line "building" peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. All the time they are instructed that they are workers, not students, and as team members they won't get their sandwiches if they do not do their assigned jobs.

- Plano, Texas senior high school students who arrive at the Clarion Hotel each morning file papers, dip strawberries in chocolate and place lemon wedges on glasses.

To some, these examples may seem harmless. But they are the educational outcome of systematic ideas with an extensive pedigree.

German Model

The archetype and inspiration for NCEE's workplace model and school-to-work system lies in Germany.

Germany's apprenticeship system is often cited as the model of human resource development. As in Germany, Tucker's

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from the ranks of management, engineering, marketing and support staff. But these savings, though important, were mainly a means to an end — pushing decisions down in the organizations."

Nevertheless, Tucker laments that fewer than five percent of American firms have embraced his ideal. He assumes American business is slow to adopt his model because the American workforce lacks the necessary skills and because businesses make irrational choices to maintain outmoded practices.

For those corporations hesitant or unwilling to embrace his performance model, Tucker advocates government intervention to force them to reorganize. He proposes legislation imposing limits on layoffs, providing wage supports and training levies, and enforcing cooperation between management and labor.

Resource Development

Most importantly, he calls for the reorganization of American education. In exchange for government intervention into their affairs, Tucker offers American corporations the expectation that revamped schools will prepare a highly skilled workforce.

age 16 or the tenth grade.

More advanced certificates, such as the Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM) and occupational certificates, would qualify students for higher levels of employment. By increasing access to more prestigious jobs, the certificates would force schools and parents to participate in the school-to-work system.

A system of Employment and Training Boards would oversee the entire school-to-work apparatus. It would act as a conduit to carry labor market information from the business sector to the education sector, aligning education with economic need.

A Labor Market Information System (LMIS) would provide labor projections. No more than a government-managed job-projection database, LMIS would target particular jobs and industries in any given location. This would enable schools to modify their curricula and integrate the appropriate vocational and technical training.

In addition, businesses would partner with local schools, providing financial support and industry expertise in curriculum and program design. This would further ensure that local industry needs were met.

How would academic coursework be

system of standards, certificates, assessments and employment boards is intended to ensure that all education is relevant to the real world and is workplace-specific.

Tucker claims businesses in highly industrialized nations like Germany and Japan are transitioning from mass-production to high-performance work organizations. He maintains that in order to remain competitive in the global economy, American business must also embrace high-performance work organizations, apprenticeship-type education and credentialing.

Convinced that America has lost its competitive edge, Tucker ranks Japan and Germany as the twin colossi of the world economy. In *Thinking for a Living*, Tucker and Marshall assert that Germany and Japan have "risen to the status of the world's economic juggernaut, with long-term rates of growth in gross national product, productivity and real wages far exceeding our own." In the authors' estimation, "they now outdistance us on one important indicator after another."

The recent economic woes of Germany and Japan cast a somewhat different light on the claims Tucker and Marshall make in their 1993 book. The United States has exceeded productivity in Europe and Japan since the start of such comparisons in 1961. While worldwide productivity is increasing, neither Japan nor Germany has reached the U.S. level.

And high labor costs have led some German corporations to move their operations abroad. A June 1997 National Public Radio "Marketplace" segment noted that Mercedes-Benz and BMW are taking the label "Made in Germany" off their cars. The label, according to a German interviewee, now means "high costs, 100-year-old technology, and lousy service. 'Made in Germany' is no longer a boast. It's a curse."

Poor Education

Clearly, Tucker's plans for centralized manipulation of the labor market are dangerous for the American economy. They are going nowhere. But what about NCEE's school-to-work plan?

No one denies that too many frontline workers today lack the literacy and math skills necessary to perform job assignments beyond the most rudimentary tasks.

According to a recent report from the National Association of Manufacturers, "40 percent of all 17-year-olds do not have the necessary math skills — and more than 60 percent do not have the necessary reading skills — to work in a \$33,000-per-annum production job at a modern auto plant."

NCEE and like-minded school-to-work advocates claim that students are more engaged and motivated by the type of learning entailed in school-to-work curricula. That also may be true.

But the question remains: what are they learning and how well?

Advocates of traditional schooling say academic knowledge, not "workplace" skills, are the bedrock of an intelligent and motivated workforce. The Hudson Institute in *Workforce 2020*, its landmark report on workforce development, explained: "If America could increase the number of traditional high school graduates with the appropriate reading, writing, math, reasoning and computer skills, it could go a long way toward filling available jobs and laying a suitable foundation on which workers could upgrade their skills once in the workforce."

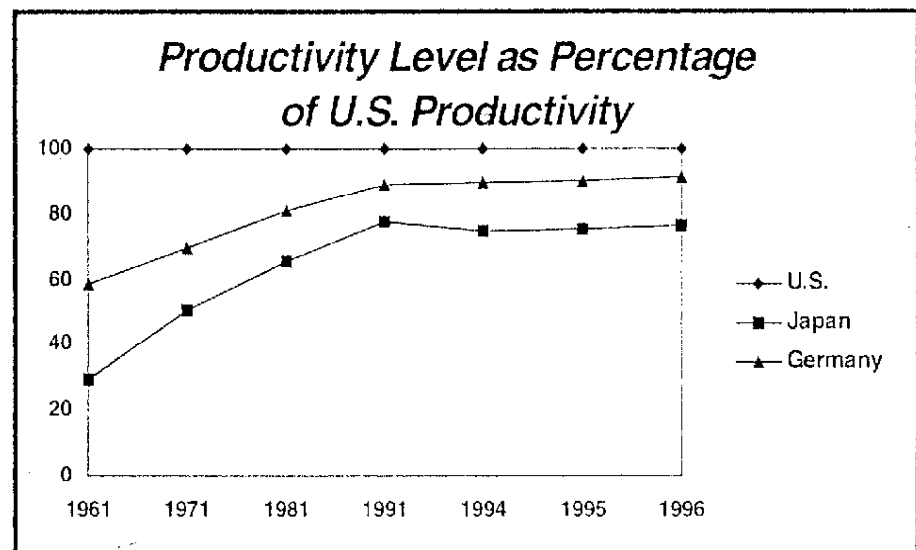
One problem with contextual learning is that the details of the application — the cars, the basketmaking — interfere with the acquisition of knowledge. Experts in cognitive psychology argue that the results of this type of learning are highly

variable and uncertain. In *The Schools We Need & Why We Don't Have Them*, E.D. Hirsch, Jr. cites research demonstrating that contextual learning "does not inculcate knowledge and skill effectively, securely or universally." Furthermore, "what children remember remains uncontrolled, contingent and largely irrelevant to definite and responsible learning goals."

NCEE ignores research that demonstrates that children who learn contextually do not perform well when basic knowledge and theoretical thought are required. Those who experience liberal arts education, however, easily adapt to contextual learning situations. The more specific or situation-bound knowledge becomes, the less a student is able to generalize and transfer knowledge to new and different situations.

Education oriented to work skills and apprenticeship learning is likely to produce graduates who are less versatile and unable to readily change occupations without complete retraining. By contrast, graduates of a liberal arts education can readily learn new skills and adjust to new jobs.

It is doubtful that NCEE's strategy would raise the level of academic achievement among America's youth. Its school-to-work system lacks academic focus, ignoring traditional academic disciplines and the foundations of learning. School-to-



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Productivity and Technology, *Comparative Real Gross Domestic Product Per Capita and Per Employed Person: Fourteen Countries, 1960-1996*, February 1998, p.12.

work focuses on the application, the relation and utility of literacy and mathematics to the workplace. But it is difficult to apply what one does not know.

Friends in High Places

School-to-work has no appeal to most private business leaders, but the concept is now embraced at the federal level. Elements of it can be found in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 and the Workforce Investment Partnership Act of 1998. These laws create a national skill standards board, workforce development boards, content standards and performance standards, skill standards, certificates, curriculum integration and business-education partnerships.

Tucker's vision might have become just one of many faddish reforms on the education landscape if not for his ability to garner support through propitious alliances and relationships.

In 1989, Tucker created the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce under the auspices of NCEE. He was principal author of the Commission's report, *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!*, issued one year later. All the elements of Tucker's plan for human resource development were set forth in this report, which recast the national education debate in terms of economic policy.

Backed by millions in financing from such funders as the Carnegie Corporation, German Marshall Fund, John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts and New American Schools Corporation, Tucker has embarked on an ambitious agenda of school reform, work force development and standards formation.

Tucker has created four major programs under the NCEE umbrella to carry out his agenda:

- The National Alliance for Restructuring Education, recently renamed America's Choice School Design, is intended to be a catalyst for school reform.

- New Standards, formed in conjunction with the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center, is developing internationally benchmarked performance assessments and standards for American students.

- The Workforce Skills Program is charged with creating and implementing a system of professional and technical standards and developing school-to-work and labor market systems. This program provides technical assistance to the federal National Skill Standards Board.

- The High Performance Management Program helps school districts restructure their management and organization.

These NCEE programs would be no more than a reformer's pipe dream were it not for the patronage Marc Tucker enjoys from the President and First Lady. Their support has made it possible for him to gain access to political power.

Tucker's system of human resource development discourages true competition.

Michael Cohen, then Director of Education Programs for the National Governors Association was a key participant at the 1989 Charlottesville education summit. Later he joined NCEE as Director of its National Alliance for Restructuring Education. While remaining an employee of NCEE, Cohen voluntarily served as Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign adviser on education. After the 1992 election, Cohen joined the presidential transition team to draft proposals on job training and school-to-work training. For more than three years, he was a senior adviser to Secretary of Education Riley and oversaw passage and implementation of Goals 2000. Cohen now serves as President Clinton's special adviser on education.

Another notable link to Clinton is one-time NCEE trustee Ira Magaziner, architect of Clinton's failed health care plan. Magaziner was chair of the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, which produced *America's Choice*.

Tucker's work has had enormous impact on the Clinton administration. It was reported during the 1992 campaign that of five books said to be on the president-elect's "business reading" list, *Thinking for a Living*, co-authored by Marc Tucker,

was one of them. Clinton cited Tucker's work as a major influence on both the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act.

America's Choice

NCEE and the Clinton administration are not convinced that the free market is more productive and efficient than any government framework to regulate the economy. The contrivances of school-to-work will only further hinder the economy they purport to benefit.

No deliberately contrived labor market systems can align projections with actual job openings. These systems are more reactionary than predictive. School-business partnerships would guide students into careers which meet the narrowly focused requirements of the schools' partnered businesses. Occupational certification or licensing would not only verify qualifications but also would restrict entry into selected occupations.

By forging coercive partnerships among schools, employers and labor unions, Tucker's system of human resource development discourages true competition. Workforce boards will provide the opportunity for members to fix markets, drive up labor costs and stifle innovation.

While education always has had economic implications, never before has the U.S. government directly tied economic development and business needs to school curricula. Learning will be trivialized as utilitarian education replaces intellectual growth with credentialing and job security.

In his 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom*, F.A. Hayek rightly perceived: "Economic control is not merely control of a sector of human life which can be separated from the rest; it is the control of the means for all other ends. And whoever has sole control of the means must also determine which ends are to be served, which values are to be rated higher or lower—in short what men should believe and strive for."

"America's choice" is not about high skills or low wages; rather the choice is what we should believe in and strive for.

Virginia Miller is an education researcher and consultant. She has testified across the country on education issues and is a nationally recognized speaker and author on education reform.