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COMMENTARY

Flabby, Inefficient, Outdated

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Today a bipartisan commission of high-profile academic, government, business and labor leaders selected by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) will release a report that provides a sobering assessment of our nation's education system: Only 18 out of 100 high-school freshmen will graduate on time, enroll directly in college and earn a two-year degree in three years or a four-year degree in six. Just 18!

It used to be that those without college degrees could count on well-paying jobs in manual labor; those days are long gone. Now, not only are we losing low-skilled jobs to nations with lower wages, but more and more of these nations are developing education systems to compete with us for high-skilled jobs. And as technology and communications make the world a smaller place, they are growing ever more competitive.


For much of the 20th century, the education level of America's work force was second-to-none. But others have caught up, and even moved past us. Now, unless we take bold action, we risk losing our competitive edge. The problem is not that America doesn't spend enough money on education -- we spend enormous amounts, far more than any other nation. But we're not getting a sufficient return on our investment. The fact is, our education system looks a lot like the U.S. auto industry in the 1970s -- stuck in a flabby, inefficient, outdated production model driven by the needs of employees rather than consumers.

For instance, we have built too many bureaucracies that lack clear lines of accountability, which means that mediocrity and failure are tolerated, and excellence goes unrewarded. We recruit a disproportionate share of teachers from among the bottom third of their college classes. Then we give them lifetime tenure after three years, and we reward them based on longevity, not performance. We fail to help struggling students in the early years, when costs are lower, and then, in the upper grades, we pay for expensive remediation programs which have very limited success. And we allow vast funding inequalities to exist between school districts, with poor students, who are disproportionately black and Hispanic, paying the price.

We can continue to invest enormous sums of money in this failing system -- and remain like Detroit in the 1970s, slipping further and further behind our international competitors. Or, we can put our famous American ingenuity to work and build a better system -- and become like Silicon Valley today, which is leading the world in innovation and technology.

The choice is clear, but the challenge will not be easy. It will require a top-to-bottom rethinking of

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our school system, one that insists on a performance-based culture of accountability that is oriented around children, not bureaucracies. It will require us to offer higher teacher salaries to attract more of the best and brightest, and to offer financial rewards to the most successful teachers. It will require us to set and uphold high standards, encourage innovation and competition, and end social promotion -- the harmful practice of advancing students to the next grade despite their poor academic performance. And it will require us to invest in early childhood development and distribute funding more equitably.

These are exactly the goals we have been working toward in New York City, and even though we still have a long way to go, the early results are encouraging. These goals are also at the heart of the new NCEE report. Deciding how to achieve them will require tough choices, and not everyone -- myself included -- will agree with all of the commission's recommendations. But beyond the specifics of this report, achieving real progress requires all of us to think anew and to challenge conventional ways of doing things.

This means that politicians must show a willingness to stand up to special interests, including unions. School administrators must lead from the front in exploring more innovative, performance-driven ideas. Teachers must be given the tools and support they need to succeed -- and be held accountable for results in their classrooms. And parents must recognize that the schools can't do it by themselves; values and ethics begin in the home.

Nothing less is required to keep the American Dream flourishing in the 21st century. It won't be easy, but we can do it. And to keep America at the head of the class, we must.

Mr. Bloomberg is the mayor of New York City.

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