Marc Tucker Presents a Warmed-Over Plan

by Phyllis Schlafly January 24, 2007

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The problems with public schools — low scores and lack of discipline — are bad and not improving. Therefore, we need the federal government to take the management of schools away from school boards, and we need state taxpayers to take the funding of schools away from local jurisdictions.

Right? No, wrong — because there is no evidence that those draconian changes will improve test scores or student behavior. But Marc Tucker, who peddled school "reform" in the 1990s from his National Center on Education and the Economy, has reemerged to sell us old wine in new bottles.

Tucker's New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce has just received national publicity for a verbose report called "Tough Choices or Tough Times." It's larded with criticisms about our "expensive elementary and secondary education system" that produces "only mediocre results."

Asserting that "it is the system that is the problem, it is the system that must be rebuilt," Tucker calls for the total overhaul of U.S. education by 2021 into a "national public school system." His plan is labeled "far-reaching," "ground-breaking," and designed to meet "the challenges of a rapidly changing global economy."

Tucker would abandon local funding of schools in favor of state funding on a uniform formula to make funding more "equitable," and sweeten the pot with an additional $19 billion a year.

He would send a $500 check to each child at birth, continue tax-funded contributions to the kid's "Personal Competitiveness Account" until he is age 16, and make later payments if he then gets only a low-paid job. The student could use the money to pay for any "work-related" (not purely academic) program of study.

The report confidently assures us that the redeployment of resources by (1) recruiting smarter teachers (licensed by the state and paid up to $95,000 for a school year), (2) putting all 4-year-olds and low-income 3-year-olds into universal public pre-school, and (3) spending more on disadvantaged students, will enable us to "send almost everyone to college and have them do well there."

Schools would be operated by independent contractors and run by teachers. But "no organization could operate a school that was not affiliated with a helping organization approved by the state" which has "the capacity to provide technical assistance and training to the schools."

The function of the local school boards would be to collect a "wide range of data," forward them to the state, and connect schools to "a wide range of social services in the community."

Then comes national economic planning. Tucker calls for federal legislation to get the states "to create regional economic development authorities" that would develop "goals and strategies for their regions," and coordinate "the work of the region's education and training institutions to make sure that each region's workers develop the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in that labor market."

Those who follow education fads and follies will remember Marc Tucker as the author of a master plan for the federal takeover of public schools spelled out in his famous 18-page "Dear Hillary" letter written on November 11, 1992. That letter urged the incoming Clinton Administration "to remold the entire American [public school] system" into "a seamless web that literally extends from cradle to grave and is the same system for everyone," coordinated by "a system of labor market boards at the local, state and federal levels" where curriculum and "job matching" will be handled by counselors "accessing the integrated computer-based program."

Tucker's ideas formed the basis of the Goals 2000 and School-to-Work laws passed by the Democratic Congress in 1994. School-to-Work became the code word to change the mission of the public schools FROM teaching children knowledge and skills TO training them to serve a national planned economy in jobs selected by workforce boards. Nothing in his plan had anything to do with teaching schoolchildren how to read.

The Tucker 1990s plan to restructure the public schools was based on specific mechanisms of control: (1) bypass all elected officials on school boards and in state legislatures by redirecting the funding; (2) build a database ("a labor market information system") into which school personnel would scan all information about every schoolchild and his family; and (3) use the slogan "high standards" to cement national control of tests and assessments.

"Tough Choices or Tough Times" is so deja vu. It will not make American students smarter; it will just make them cogs in the global economy.