

# Politics First, Students Last

*A well-heeled commission issues a weak-kneed report*

From Aspen, Colorado, still another education commission reports. Armed with Gates and other foundation dollars and headed by two former governors, one a Democrat, the other a Republican, commission members tell us what to do about No Child Left Behind.

Predictably, the Aspenites identify a major crisis: “America today faces a stark choice.... Do we take bold steps to accelerate progress in education? or risk...our competitiveness in the global economy?” But to resolve the crisis, the commission offers nothing but minimalist recommendations that (despite various protests) hardly offend a vested interest—not a school board, nor a teachers union, nor a state department of education, nor even the poor, maligned Bush administration.

The commission claims to have scoured the country for good ideas, but they are unable to find a single, exciting state or local intervention they can recommend for national adoption.

Perhaps one can expect nothing more from a commission composed mainly of academics and former members of the public school establishment—folks that once were school superintendents, state education officers, school board members, teachers union officials, or school teachers. After bragging (complaining?) about all the reading and listening they have done, how timid and tired they seem.

And how protective of the interests they still represent! One would have received a more penetrating analysis from British peers asked to reform the House of Lords.

Whenever a good idea comes to the fore, it is so qualified as to lose all punch. For example, the commission properly grapples with the need to revise NCLB’s flawed mechanism for holding schools accountable. It is even bold enough to recommend that the reshaped law take into account, *in part*, the “growth trajectory” of individual students. But if student growth is the only way to evaluate a school, as the commission properly seems to think, why does the report recommend only a partial change? And why not examine more closely the five-point grading scale that

helped lift school performance in Florida under Jeb Bush’s watch (see “The Education Governor,” *features*, page 19).

The teachers unions do attack the Aspen commission for asking states to track teacher performance by checking to see how much their students are learning. Yet the report says nothing about removing a teacher identified as a repeated failure from the classroom. For this commission, reform means shifting bad teachers from one school to the next.

When the commissioners consider schools that fail five years running, they can only recommend “comprehensive reform,” leaving the reader to wonder just what they mean by that phrase. Why do they avoid mentioning charter schools? Why do they ignore such energetic innovations as the one led by Indianapolis mayor and Democrat Bart Peterson (see *features*, page 33).

The commission proposes tests for high school seniors, but decides against requiring adequate performance for high school graduation. It says nothing about the jump in Massachusetts scores once such a graduation requirement was introduced.

The Aspenites correctly urge that eligible students be given readier access to tutoring and the other privately provided services NCLB requires. But they do not call for an end to the multiple conflicts of interest that pervade the program: Currently, school districts have little (even negative) incentive to promote the tutoring, as they pocket the dollars when few students participate. And districts then compete directly with the private providers they regulate.

The commission properly asks schools to do more to facilitate choice for parents whose children attend a school that is failing. But it ignores the private school option—and even the option of attending public schools outside students’ districts of residence.

The aspen tree is well designed to bend with every wind that sweeps through the mountains of Colorado. The “Aspen report” well deserves that monicker.

— Paul E. Peterson

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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