

What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future

A Review

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The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future released the comprehensive report What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future in September 1996. The Commission's findings are the result of two years research and intense study presented in four volumes and a video tape developed for an audience of policymakers, educators, and analysts. The four components consist of a main report, a summary booklet, information on model programs that support the recommendations, and a compilation of research papers in addition to the video tapes.

The authors are convinced that they have "found a profession that has suffered from decades of neglect." The goal that they propose is that "by the year 2006, America will provide all students in the country with what should be their educational birthright: access to competent, caring and qualified teachers." They assert that their goal will challenge the American public and propose that What Matters Most shall lead to implementation of recommended courses of action, which they believe are an indispensable tool for educators sincerely seeking improvements.

After wading through myriad resources available to guide their efforts, the Commission concluded that the "reform of elementary and secondary education depends foremost on restructuring its foundation--the teaching profession." An eye opening discussion focuses on increasing teachers' knowledge to meet the demands they face as well as refining and implementing teacher expertise in schools redesigned to support high quality

teaching and learning.

The framers of this report acknowledge that the teaching profession is faced with challenges and "what teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what children learn." In light of this, the Commission recommends that schools of education be redesigned and assert that their report offers "the single most important strategy for achieving America's education goals: a blueprint for recruiting, preparing, supporting, and rewarding excellent educators." The aim of this plan is to ensure that all schools are equipped with teachers who possess the aptitudes that will result in optimum learning on behalf of all children.

The scope of this report focuses on organizing school systems that support this endeavor through clear, high standards, quality curriculum, and parent engagement.. Readers are urged to view the challenges that are outlined as windows of opportunity. When it comes to preparing teachers, the Commission identified the following five interlocking changes:

- 1) serious standards for students and teachers
- 2) reinvention of teacher preparation and professional development
- 3) overhaul teacher recruitment
- 4) encourage and reward teaching knowledge and skill
- 5) create schools organized for teacher/student success

They couched these recommended changes with the explanation that it's not that our schools aren't good, but the levels of knowledge and skills required now were previously taught to only a few. Because we have a more complex, knowledge-based, multifaceted and multicultural society, new expectations are created for teaching. In accordance with this compelling rationale, the standards being promulgated are to employ teachers with a sound knowledge of subject matter who are cognizant of how students think and learn, and also have mastered a range of teaching methods. These are based on the authors' beliefs that "teacher expertise is the single most important factor in deter-

mining student achievement."

The fact that American teachers work hard is recognized and it is pointed out that other industrialized countries fund schools and ensure development of qualified teachers by underwriting teacher preparation and salaries. In contrast, America's teachers are expected to incur substantive debt to enter a field that pays less than other occupations requiring a college degree.

What Matters Most reports that few American teachers have success to the knowledge they need to teach. It is suggested that this stems from a view held over from the early 1900s when schools were run like factories with top down control and teachers were allowed little involvement in the decision making process.

The following major problems in need of correction identified in the report are:

- 1) inadequate teacher preparation
- 2) slipshod recruiting and hiring
- 3) sink or swim induction
- 4) lack of professional development or rewards for knowledge and skill
- 5) schools structured for failure

In response to the above concerns the Commission recommends swift implementation of the interlocking changes discussed previously.

The strengths of What Matters Most lie in its straightforward organization, supplementary components (particularly the excellent video tape), and clear, concise outline of concerns. Teaching for America's future is viewed as an amalgam of the traditional and the innovative. Unfortunately, the report is highly critical, as well as repetitive. The recommendations are comprehensive and challenging, yet a barrier results in that few specific thoughts on implementation are available. Eschewing a clear plan, a vague call to action is conveyed by issuing marching orders to pull together as a team focused on the goal of improv-

ing teaching and motivating students to high ideals. While this may be an admirable challenge, there are numerous educators who would argue that they have embraced this identical philosophy on a daily basis since the inception of their careers, in spite of the roadblocks they have constantly sought to overcome. Educators are proud of their accomplishments and prefer to acknowledge reports and research recognizing their strengths rather than faulting them for a lack of knowledge and preparation. If What Matters Most is sincere regarding its call for improvement of teaching, educators would advocate trading rhetoric for action.

David Hedgepeth of Valdosta State University serves as review editor for Current Issues.

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