

American Education Needs an Overhaul, National Panel of Experts Concludes

Contributed by Tobie Baker
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OXFORD, Miss. - The next president needs to overhaul America's outdated educational system, one that is inequitable, unaffordable and inaccessible.

That is the consensus of a national panel of education experts who convened at the University of Mississippi Thursday afternoon to discuss America's educational system. The panelists examined college affordability, high-stakes testing, institutional accessibility and school accountability.

The issue is a matter of more than just money, and must include increased preparation in the K-12 system, said panelist William Brock, former U.S. congressman, senator, ambassador and presidential cabinet member. The average cost to attend a four-year public university surpasses \$50,000, he said.

To achieve this goal, Brock suggested the next president examine the Lexus versus BMW business models. When Toyota launched its Lexus nameplate, the company decided that engineers would address problems during production. BMW engineers, however, wait until an automobile is completed before inspectors come in to correct problems.

"Fourth graders in America are near the top when compared to other countries in the world," Brock said. "Our eighth graders are in the middle, and our 12th graders are in the lower 20 percent."

"Access has to do with preparation," he said. "We have to fix the problem when it happens."

Panelist Marc S. Tucker, president and CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy, agreed. He noted that America is ranked 10th across the globe for the number of college graduates, a number that is falling drastically, he said.

"The U.S. spends more per capita on higher education than any other country," Tucker said. "We don't have a problem getting students into college. We have a problem keeping them there, because they can't do college level work."

On the same issue, panelist Gloria Ladson-Billings, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor and former president of the American Educational Research Association, did not agree. She suggested the next president focus more on need-based tuition, much like need-based scholarships.

"We need creative ways to handle the equity issues," Ladson-Billings said. "Far too many young people don't even look for a four-year college because of the affordability issue."

"We can't give up on these generations," she said. "It's not fair to our democracy."

Panelist M. Christopher Brown II suggested that America needs to change its perception of what is deemed a public good. K-12 education is considered a public good, but higher education is looked upon as a private good, he said.

"We have enough colleges and universities to serve any American wishing to attend college," Brown said. "The failure of our educational system is the lack of recruiting the brightest students to become teachers."

Brown suggested that education as an industry was never intended for mass production, but rather a lone career option for women. Tucker piggybacked, stating that medical, legal and business professionals, for example, are empowered to decide how to perform their jobs, while teachers are micro-managed by policy administrators.

"Every politician with a solution should come teach in our schools," said panelist and former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige. "Policies are made by elitists, but the work is done by practitioners. The new administration needs to give these practitioners the power to do their job."

His comment drew a roar of applause from the estimated 400 people in attendance. Much of the audience was made up of teachers and administrators representing some 50 Mississippi public schools.

"Teachers must deal with psychological, social and discipline problems," Paige continued. "These classroom challenges don't allow teachers to teach, and the policymakers don't have to look our children in the eye everyday."

Panelist Rick Hess, director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, argued that the educational system is flooded with too many unskilled educators. With a national teacher-to-student ratio of 1:15, fewer, but better trained teachers are needed, Hess said. The U.S. has some 2.3 million teachers.

"We need to allow teachers to focus their skills," Hess said. "They shouldn't have to worry about progress monitoring and discipline issues. I wonder if they have enough time to teach?"

"We need to place the power in the hands of the teachers. The world is changing, and we keep trying to jam a square peg into a round hole. We haven't changed."

With a college degree becoming increasingly essential, universities should take measures to hold themselves accountable for the education they provide, said panelist Sara Hebel, senior editor of The Chronicle of Higher Education.

"Colleges should be held accountable to ensure their students can perform specific tasks," Hebel said. "This would benefit the universities because it would attract more students, increase academic standings and secure future funding."

The panel was sponsored by the UM School of Education. Its dean, Tom Burnham, said the school was delighted to host this forum as part of the activities leading up to Friday's presidential debate.

"We recognize that one of our critical roles is to foster and support dialogue around the issues of education," Burnham

said. "This was a wonderful opportunity for us to be an integral part of a rare history-making event."

On the dawn of a new presidential administration, the state of America's public schools and higher education is of extreme importance, said RoSusan D. Bartee, UM education professor and organizer of the forum.

"The pulse of our nation's schools and colleges remains a necessary informant in determining those areas in which we are progressing and those areas needing improvement," she said.

For more information on the presidential debate or related events, go to <http://debate.olemiss.edu/> .