

NCEE's Tucker labors to bridge education, workforce

By Katherine Shek

For Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), the hourglass is running out for America's education system to catch up with the global economy.

"We have very little time to greatly improve education if we are going to avoid a substantial decrease in our standard of living," he said.

If schools do not offer students a world-class education to be competitive in today's economy, many young people will be left with second-class jobs with low pay and long hours, Tucker believes.

He founded NCEE in 1988 to address that challenge. The mission has led him and his organization to investigate education systems in more than 20 countries and four continents.

After 16 years, Tucker has concluded that successful education systems share a few key features. "They have high academic standards, high quality exams matching the standards, and they have the curriculum framework laid out and instructional materials that match the framework," he said.

Tucker works to ensure America's schools are among the best in the world not just by spreading the word about standards to national policymakers, but also by working with individual schools and districts.

To that end, NCEE created America's Choice School Design in 1997, a comprehensive school-reform program credited with closing the achievement gap between low performing minority students and their peers.

Most of NCEE's work is devoted to America's Choice, which has been adopted by 547 schools across the nation. States and districts consult with NCEE for technical assistance, professional development and instructional materials.

An independent evaluation this summer showed the program helped Hispanic students in grades 4-8 gain an additional three months of learning in reading per year (ED, July 20).

Comprehensive Approach

Tucker stressed that America's Choice is not a product NCEE offers—rather, it's a comprehensive solution. With the accountability movement fueled by the No



Child Left Behind Act (*see side bar, right*), demand for such reform is growing, he said.

But to do it right, Tucker added, school reform must be implemented system-wide, not school by school. “We work with entire districts and states,” he said. “When we work with states, we aim to increase their capacity.”

Two state education departments—Mississippi’s and Georgia’s—have made America’s Choice available to their schools.

Mississippi’s program, renamed Mississippi’s Choice, has helped 40 low-performing schools improve over the past year, said Susan Rucker, assistant state superintendent of innovation and school improvement.

Participating schools gained 10 percent on the state’s language test, compared with 3 percent across the state; and 15 percent in math, compared with 6 percent across the state, state data show. “In one year’s time, we are definitely seeing improvement,” Rucker said.

Not only does NCEE offer comprehensive solutions to school reform, it also provides ongoing support to states, districts and schools. Its regional offices have leaders visiting states, districts and schools monthly to provide professional development.

Other Initiatives

In addition to America’s Choice, NCEE offers two other programs—the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) and a workforce development program.

NISL works with school districts and other organizations to conduct high quality professional development to principals.

Kissing Cousins

America’s Choice and No Child Left Behind take similar approaches to improving student achievement. Both require schools to:

- Meet state standards, as measured by state assessments;
- Adopt programs and interventions that are research-based and proven effective;
- Ensure that major subgroups of students make academic progress;
- Weild data to help students make annual academic progress; and
- Employ reading assessments and reading programs based on five essential components: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, reading fluency and reading comprehension (ED, April 14, 2000)

The workforce development program helps local communities, states and federal agencies implement workforce development training and evaluate promising training and policies.

NCEE also hosts policy forums throughout the year highlighting research in standards-based education reforms.

Philanthropic Roots

Over the years, NCEE has been supported by corporate and foundation philanthropies, as well as funding through federal, state and school district contracts. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, D.C., it has six regional offices with a total of about 160 employees.

The organization was born out of Tucker's vision of how America's schools should be reformed to support the world's changing economy. It was initially funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, where Tucker served as executive director of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy from 1985 to 1987.

Tucker's belief in school reform stemmed from his studies of Edwin Land, the founder of Polaroid Corporation, who believed a lack of basic education made it difficult to retrain his low-skills workers on the assembly lines.

Land was ahead of the curve in realizing that young people needed world-class skills and knowledge to be competitive with workers in other countries in the increasingly integrated world economy, Tucker believes.

That was a "fearful message," he said, because "half of the students were receiving

education that didn't prepare them for the jobs of tomorrow."

For more information, see www.ncee.org.