Introduction

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The coming decade holds immense potential for dramatic improvement in American education and in the achievement of American children—provided that we seize the many opportunities at hand.

But the forces of resistance, lethargy, complacency, and inertia that have largely blocked such dramatic improvements over the past several decades won't magically vanish. Rather, they can be counted upon to do their utmost to keep things pretty much as they have been.

If they again prevail, our standards will remain low, our achievement lacking, our tests not worth preparing students for, our school choices few and often unsatisfactory, our ablest youngsters unchallenged, many of our teachers ill-prepared, our technology just so-so, and our return on investment disappointing. All the while, our many competitors on this shrinking planet will continue to make gains in no small part because the wealthiest and most powerful nation on that planet has failed to maximize its human capital during the period of their lives when girls and boys are most

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susceptible to learning and when society has the greatest ability to shape what they will learn.

In this volume, members of the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K–12 Education examine both the potentials and the pitfalls that lie ahead for primary-secondary education in the United States.

The eleven of us (plus two emeritus members) have worked together for more than fifteen years to examine, analyze, diagnose, and prescribe for this country's education system across a host of topics. During that time, we have—separately and collectively—authored twenty-one books under the aegis of the task force; we launched (and served as the editorial board for) *Education Next,* today's most significant education-policy journal; we advised governors, legislators, and presidential candidates; we testified at congressional hearings; we met with educators, public officials, and fellow scholars; we took part in innumerable conferences, seminars, and workshops; we wrote countless articles, talked with journalists, and made media appearances; and we deliberated long and hard over an extraordinary array of education-policy issues.

Whew! Although the task force as we have known it will soon change its structure, those issues and the challenges and opportunities that they present are not going away. If anything, they're intensifying.

And so we offer this volume, which mostly looks ahead but does so in the context of where American K–12 education has been, what changes (primarily but not always for the better) have been made, what has and has not been accomplished by way of a comprehensive overhaul, and where things stand today.

As you will see in the eleven short chapters that follow, although far from sanguine, we're fundamentally optimistic about the opportunities at hand. Each task force member tackles one (or a closely related set) of these opportunities. While we cannot claim

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that the result is completely comprehensive, it's more than illustrative of how our education system could be transformed—and why that's not pie in the sky. We also indicate dozens of ways that further research, policy analysis, and evaluation can assist with (and provide vital feedback on) such a transformation.

The book is organized into three sections.

Part I, *Governance, Politics, and Personnel,* takes up three mega-issues that beset our K–12 system.

Paul Hill considers the ways that the system's inherited structures and governance arrangements get in the way of radical improvement and frames some bold and imaginative alternatives (chapter 1).

Eric Hanushek asks how best to ensure that tomorrow's schools and students have the quality teachers that they need (chapter 2).

Terry Moe examines political obstacles to change, above all teachers unions, and explains how the powerful advance of technology will inexorably weaken their ability to block needed reforms (chapter 3).

Part II, *Crucial Changes,* appraises the current condition of three prominent engines of education reform—standards/assessment/accountability, school choice, and online learning—and sets forth both some challenges that they face and the reasons that those challenges must be overcome.

John Chubb maps the fast-changing world of online and "blended" learning and shows why, for the first time in memory, even K–12 education will yield—for the better—to improvements made possible by technology (chapter 4).

Herbert Walberg takes stock of school choice in the United States, describing its evolution, what's known about its educational value, and what remains to be investigated (chapter 5).

Williamson Evers takes up the often-contentious realm of academic standards, testing, and accountability with particular reference to the recently developed Common Core standards for English

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and math and the assessment challenges that accompany them (chapter 6).

Paul Peterson examines a key sub-topic within accountability—holding students themselves responsible for their learning—with particular reference to the hard-to-reform territory of high schools (chapter 7).

Part III, *Resources and Research,* raises four essential concerns about K–12 education and its reform.

Tom Loveless asks how to ensure that our students' future curriculum—buffeted and amplified by new standards, tests, technology, and more—incorporates the most important skills and content and doesn't rekindle yesterday's curriculum wars (chapter 8).

Caroline Hoxby asks whether, in a time of tight budgets, we can afford to make the changes that the system needs—particularly in quality teaching, suitable technology, and sufficient school choices—and shows why the answer is affirmative (chapter 9).

Grover "Russ" Whitehurst asks how we can be confident that our schools and the educational strategies they employ are actually effective and explains how evidence-based research and evaluation can boost that confidence (chapter 10).

And in the final essay, I examine why American education has been neglecting its high-ability (gifted) students and suggest what can be done to develop this vital human resource, both for the country's good and to continue our long march to providing all youngsters with suitable learning opportunities (chapter 11).

My task force colleagues join me in thanking the Hoover Institution for the extraordinary opportunities it has afforded us to meet with, provoke, inform, and advance each other's thinking and stimulate each other's work over the past decade and a half. We thank co-editor (and Hoover's senior associate director) Richard Sousa, who has deftly "herded us cats" with patience, sound judgment, and expert guidance during the entire history of the task force, and Kristen Leffelman, who has helped keep us organized

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over the past couple of years. We're also deeply grateful to the Koret Foundation and other generous donors to Hoover that have made all this possible.

The task force's combined activities may be winding down. But we are not—and we look forward to continuing our quest to bring scholarship, analysis, and forthrightness to bear on the challenges and opportunities that face American education in the years ahead.

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