



A Union of Professionals

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American Federation of Teachers
QuEST Keynote Speech
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Good afternoon, brothers and sisters. On behalf of Nat LaCour, our secretary-treasurer, and Toni Cortese, our executive vice president—welcome to the 35th anniversary of QuEST. And thank you. Thank you for your time, your work and your dedication.

You are the AFT: 1.4 million members strong. We will continue to play a leading role in improving public education in America.

This conference is a gathering of people who are doing that work every day—not only AFT members but superintendents, school board members and others. We are the only national education organization that puts on a professional issues conference like this. QuEST is a great forum for learning, sharing and discussing.

Before I go on, I would like to acknowledge the loss of three AFT leaders. They worked every day for the creation of positive change. Former AFT vice presidents Tom Mooney of Ohio, George Springer of Connecticut and Paul Devlin of Massachusetts were extremely gifted and creative leaders. We are saddened with their passing, but inspired by the example they set. They were personally devoted to helping create a better life for all the members of this union. They worked to change the world through collective action. That is the monument and example they leave all of us.

It's summer for most of us, but Washington, D.C., has its own seasons—and right now we find ourselves in the middle of “reauthorization season.”

You know time is a great teacher. And five years under NCLB has taught us that it is time for this law to change. We need legislation that gives teachers and schools the tools they need to provide our children with the very best education. We need legislation that focuses on improving teaching and learning rather than on testing and testing—and more testing. We need legislation that gives credit for the progress that schools and students make—rather than legislation that punishes schools. And we need legislation that values teaching, and values teachers for enriching our children's lives.

That's not what we have now. Now we have a law that places a premium on collecting statistics instead of helping children. That is not what this kind of federal legislation—historically—was intended to be. NCLB is the latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. They renamed it, they repackaged it and they re-sold it. But they “forgot” the money—and they forgot what children really need. This law was intended—originally—to help level the playing field.

That is why, the AFT—in town hall meetings and other member forums—developed a set of recommendations to address the major problems in NCLB. Our recommendations, if adopted, would fix adequate yearly progress—the law's broken accountability system. Our recommendations would change the law so that instead of penalizing struggling schools, it would offer them real help.

Finally, our recommendations would make testing what it ought to be: a tool for improving teaching and learning instead of a bludgeon for punishing schools and students.

Our staff, working with many of you and under the leadership of Toni Cortese, is pressing the AFT's message for change on a daily basis. Just a few miles from here, congressional members and staff are drafting the reauthorization of NCLB. They shouldn't be doing that without hearing from all of you.

Before you leave this week, I want each of you to go to the AFT's Action Center right outside these doors. And I want you to do three things. First, send a letter to your representative and tell them "Let's Get It Right." Second, you will get pre-stamped post cards when you leave. Take them home and find nine colleagues who will join you in sending them to your representatives. And third, I want you to continue to work with your local and state affiliates to make your voice heard. Because Congress won't get it right without you.

Our message is clear. We will work with and support measures that improve our schools. And we will oppose any bill that doesn't. But there is more to education than NCLB. And there is more to the AFT than just reacting to what others propose.

We have always been a leader in education policy—a proactive organization. This week at QuEST, we're sharing our proposals to strengthen all schools and reach all children. We are calling this agenda "Charting the Course." It addresses five key elements:

- Teaching Quality;
- Safe and Orderly Schools;
- Early Reading Instruction and Intervention;
- A Common, Knowledge-Rich Curriculum; and
- Intensive Assistance to High-Poverty Schools.

Not every school needs to strive for every one of the goals. Some are already there. But "Charting the Course" offers a checklist of AFT action priorities that are proven to work—and this week you'll be reading and hearing a lot more about these proposals.

I'm here to talk about policy, but I'm also here to talk about how policy affects children. Allow me to share a story with you. It is about a 13-year-old girl who came from a poor home with problems. She had an abusive father. Every morning she got up, and got herself and her little brother ready for school. She woke him, dressed him and fed him—but it was apparent she often did not feed herself. Then she dropped him off at the elementary school before walking to her junior high school. Often, when she showed up, her teacher would notice that her simple, worn dress was still wet. She had washed it in the sink before school—and it didn't have time to dry. Sometimes, she did not show up at all. And her teacher thought of all that she was going through—the childhood lost, the chance for a decent life slipping away, and the blunt force of poverty that was ruining her life.

Most of you have similar stories of children like this. This one is my story. I was the teacher. It was 45 years ago.

Forty-five years—and we still have children coming to school who are underfed and uncared-for, and whose illnesses are untreated. Without addressing those needs, it is much more difficult to address their educational needs. We cannot expect to improve children's lives and children's education if we—as a society—aren't prepared to tackle problems like poverty and healthcare and nutrition. The entire community—not just the schools—has to do more about kids who come to school underfed or unhealthy or uncared-for.

So, what do we do for these vulnerable children? How do we change their world?

In three ways: First, we need to do even better during the school year. That is what “Charting the Course” is all about.

Second, we need to change the way we treat children in this country. We need to create the kind of society where *every* child is fed, nurtured and cared for. We can get there. But only by working with others who share our vision.

Third, we need to do a better job of identifying young children, from pre-K to grade 3, who start out behind—and continue to fall further behind. Teachers are already identifying these children, but we need to build the intervention system into our schools.

We are simply losing too many children during the long summer months when they forget much of what they learned during the school year. Struggling students need additional instruction, enrichment and more time. We can give them all of that by extending the school year for children whose teachers say they need extra help. We can provide an intensive summer curriculum that includes reading, writing and math. And we need to supplement the regular school year for 20 days or more for struggling students in grades K-3.

These students also need out-of-classroom activities during this time. They can visit a museum or watch a play or explore places in their community that offer enriching learning experiences. They can participate in other enriching experiences like music, art and poetry.

And so, today, I’m asking our state affiliates to work with their legislative leaders in developing legislation, state-by-state, that would do precisely that—offer extra time for students in the early grades, with a rich curriculum and enriching activities.

We can do this by extending the school year for these children. Yes, to do this, teachers must be paid more for more time. Yes, to do this, parental involvement is key. Yes, this is going to cost money.

But it needs to be done. We know how to teach children. We do it every day. But, even with excellent instruction, some children simply need more time to learn. And becoming a good reader or mastering basic math skills can change a life forever.

We’ve always known early intervention is the key. It’s time we put it on the books. It is time to reach, teach and care for our children at the most critical point in their lives.

Recently, I testified before Congress alongside other people who lead education organizations. During the question-and-answer period, a member of Congress asked, “Where should we spend our limited resources to have the greatest impact?” I said, “Spend it in the early grades.” Study after study shows that early intervention in education is more effective than trying to address a problem later.

We cannot do it soon enough. We certainly didn’t do it soon enough for my junior high school student 45 years ago. And we are not doing it soon enough for many of the children in your classrooms today.

They deserve better lives. And it’s our responsibility to make sure children like them have better opportunities and better lives.

But those of us in this room can't do it alone. We can't do it even if we engage all the teachers and paraprofessionals across the country. We need to change the nation's attitude about education and how we treat children. That means we need political leadership that shares our core beliefs.

It's been too many years since there has been the political will to create what is really needed. It's been too many years since we've had the political will to lead the most prosperous nation on a path toward social justice, quality healthcare and equal educational opportunities for all—ultimately the will to do what is right, not what is expedient or just popular.

You here in this room and many other AFT members across America have made it absolutely clear with your words and your actions that you are a mighty political force.

As I speak these words, we are again taking our measure of those candidates who seek our support for the highest office in the land. Last year, with the energy and assistance of many of you, we went out and helped elect a new Congress. We also helped shift control of 11 state legislatures and six governorships.

And we are particularly proud of the many AFT members who currently hold elective office around the country. There are more than 100, including:

- U.S. Rep. Tim Walz of Minnesota;
- Jesse White, Illinois secretary of state;
- State Sen. Teresa Fedor, the Democratic Minority Leader in Ohio;
- Linda McCulloch, the Montana state superintendent of instruction;
- New Mexico state legislators Cheryl Williams Stapleton and Mimi Stewart;
- Rhode Island state legislators Charlene Lima and Steve Smith; and
- Virginia state legislator Jeion Ward.

These are all AFT members. And they all have been elected to public office.

We were active and successful in the 2006 elections.

- We helped elect Gov. Ted Strickland in Ohio. He has since submitted a state budget that removes all funding for vouchers.
- We helped elect Gov. Eliot Spitzer in New York. His first budget substantially increased funding for primary, secondary and higher education in New York.
- We helped elect Gov. Martin O'Malley in Maryland. He recently signed a bill that requires state government contractors to pay their employees a true living wage. Not just a minimum wage, but a living wage.
- We helped elect Gov. Deval Patrick in Massachusetts. He was our guest at our 2006 convention before he was elected governor, and was first endorsed by our members in Massachusetts. He recently proposed fully-funded pre-K for every child in the state, as well as help for those struggling to pay to attend community college.

- We helped re-elect Gov. Kathleen Sebelius in Kansas. She is also an AFT member. You will meet her in person tomorrow. She paved the way for an unprecedented merger of Kansas public employee unions—AFT and AFSCME. And the merger gave them bargaining power they never had before.

Yes, brothers and sisters, your actions have consequences!

As you know, the AFT has an open and thorough process for determining the candidate we will support to be the next president of the United States. This process is your vehicle for change.

First, and most important, we are collecting your views:

- through the issues forum on AFT.org,
- through our ongoing conversations with AFT members at meetings and forums across the country, and
- through continuous consultation with state and local AFT affiliates.

And our 41-member AFT executive council has been meeting with individual candidates. In May, the council met with five of the Democratic candidates running for their party's nomination: Sen. Joe Biden, Sen. Hillary Clinton, former Sen. John Edwards, Sen. Barack Obama and Gov. Bill Richardson. Yesterday, we met with Sen. Chris Dodd and Rep. Dennis Kucinich. We also invited leading Republican candidates. So far, we have not gotten a "yes" from any of them.

When we meet with candidates, rest assured your voice is heard.

Tens of thousands of our members visited the "You Decide" Web site, which you will hear more about tomorrow. And three rank-and-file members attended our executive council meetings and asked the candidates their questions face to face.

We will continue to make sure your voice is heard throughout this campaign. It is your voice; it is your vote. You decide.

The person who ultimately gets the AFT's endorsement will first have to convince us that he or she wants more than just our national strength. You know, when we endorse a candidate, they get votes and they get our field operation, volunteers for phone banks, people who will go door to door on their behalf. So, this candidate will have to convince us that they want to work with the AFT to improve education, to improve healthcare and to improve public service in our great nation.

Once we, as a union, decide whom to support for the highest office in the land, as well as for other important elections, the real work begins.

First, the White House is not enough. We need to protect those in Congress we helped elect in 2006 and who have helped us. At the same time, we need to expand the number of seats in Congress occupied by those who share our core beliefs. It doesn't end there either.

We need to elect even more people who understand that good schools, quality healthcare and strong unions are mutually supportive entities. We have a month or so—in some places less—before the next school year begins. Your work is important to you, important to the children and important to our nation's future.

I want you to take a moment and think about what your first day would be like:

- If every child in your class had access to decent healthcare;
- If every child in your class came to school with a full stomach; and
- If all children had a supportive system to help them if they began to fall behind.

I also want you to think about what that day will be like when we have leadership throughout the country that respects you and the work you do each and every day.

We all agree that will be a very good day indeed!

And make no mistake that “good day” will come about, in part, because all of you who are the AFT will have worked in concert with our local and state affiliates to change the world—here in Washington, and in cities and communities across America.

Thank you.