



A Union of Professionals

Keynote Address by Sandra Feldman, President American Federation of Teachers

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I stand before this AFT Convention, my first one as the president of this great union, with tremendous appreciation, respect, and emotion.

Nothing I've been involved in as a union leader has been simple; nothing this great union has undertaken has been simple; nothing worth fighting for is. But the events of this last year, and the merger vote two weeks ago at the NEA Convention, certainly rate high on the challenge index.

We will talk a lot more about merger in the time set aside for the discussion this afternoon. But let me just say some things now.

As I think about my experience in this extraordinary union, as I talked to you over the last two weeks, and look at you today, I can tell you this: Those NEA delegates don't know what they're missing.

I am proud of the vision of unity we've always had - not only because a united membership is a good thing, but also because our vision always embraced the needs of America's families and children and our desire to work more effectively to fulfill them. That's what we are. And whether in a united organization or separate, that's what we'll remain.

I am proud of the AFT leadership for bringing unity as far as we did. And I commend Bob Chase for his courage and leadership in carrying forward what he knew his rank-and-file members wanted, which was a united organization.

Most of all, I am proud of you for the support, openness, and idealism you demonstrated in allowing the AFT leadership to do so.

Now let me say this. First: The NEA delegates who feared that the NEA would have been hugely changed were right. The new organization would have been a representational democracy, where elected leadership, including delegates, stand for something, for a point of view, and are accountable to the members.

Second: Those who disdained affiliation with the labor movement are forgetting three things: One, the children they serve are the children of working people--and they are either unionized or they should be.

Two, the labor movement, with all its faults--and what institution doesn't have them?--has been in the forefront of the fight for public education and the needs of children. In fact, the labor

movement helped invent free and equal public education for all. And the labor movement is even more committed to this ideal than ever before.

Three, teachers are working people, as are the other professionals presently in the union movement--nurses, doctors, engineers, actors and artists, etc., etc.

And we know from polls that our members, and teachers generally, want unity.

That is one of the reasons why, when the AFT's delegates vote on the Principles of Unity, as well as on other important matters before us, we'll vote openly--so that we can be directly accountable to the members who sent us here, and so that our members will have the further opportunity, in local elections that follow, to validate or oppose what their representatives did. That is the kind of representational democracy our Founding Fathers built this great nation upon. And that is also the AFT way.

My dear sisters and brothers, I am more proud than ever to stand before you today as the president of this great, great union!

Later, we will discuss the Principles of Unity in detail, as we planned. Because while they are no longer under negotiation, you deserve the opportunity to speak about them. And the AFT leadership needs this further opportunity to learn if we set the right direction.

But now I want to talk about the AFT. It has been many, many years now that I have been part of this great union. I have always been completely committed to our ideals and principles and full of respect for the ways in which we try to carry them out--including our intense debates and arguments on the floor of this convention and in our executive council.

Today, after having criss-crossed the country over the past year-and-a-half, deepening relationships with old friends and colleagues and making new ones with leaders and members I hadn't previously met, my pride in this union and its work has reached new heights.

It was a difficult year for me, one of the most challenging I've faced, and I want--before doing anything else--to thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for the terrific support you've shown me and the invaluable lessons you've taught me about the issues you confront and the day-to-day work you do, often under the most difficult circumstances.

I have been in schools across the country, at meetings, conventions, and rallies of all our constituent groups...talking to members about their concerns for themselves and the people they serve...about their anxieties and their hopes.... The surprise has been, not how different things are outside the small, provincial town I come from, but how similar our members' issues and concerns are, not only across the country, but also among our diverse constituencies. And I must tell you that, with each visit, my admiration for the work and dedication of our members reached new heights.

I've also been to building rep and local membership meetings...state and regional meetings...witnessing union work across the country first hand...hearing about your issues and concerns - and, yes, your anxieties about merger.

I am grateful for those discussions, for your candor, for your willingness to grapple with change, and for your loyalty to the AFT. You know, as well as I do, that these past two years have been among the toughest years our union has had to face, both organizationally and emotionally.

The last time we came together, our beloved Al Shanker presided over the convention, mustering his commanding but failing strength to warn and counsel us yet again about the mounting threats we--in fact, the whole nation--were facing...an assault on the very existence of public education, the crisis in health care, in higher education, in public service...threats to the very fabric of equal opportunity and our democratic way of life.

Al's illness and death struck each of our hearts. But for the sake of all the principles and ideals we believed in and had worked toward, shoulder to shoulder with Al, we knew we had to carry on...and, given the destructive forces gathering around, be even stronger and smarter than before. And that's what we did.

Even under the best of circumstances, our record of membership growth and the work we've been doing to improve our union would have been remarkable. But these were not the best of times. So, what we've managed to accomplish, thanks to you, is extraordinary. We've had our 17th straight year of membership growth, as you heard from Secretary-Treasurer McElroy, with growth in every Division.

We're thrilled, of course, about our organizing successes and by our growth. Numbers mean strength...having the backing and clout to represent the hopes and aspirations of our members...the capacity to fight for what we believe is good and against the bad. But our success in organizing is not only about us. It's also about ensuring an effective voice for all working Americans--after all, that's what unionism is all about, and it's what the labor movement has always done, for the unorganized as well as the organized.

And, of course, it's about having an effective voice representing the problems and aspirations of the people our members serve: children, most of all--today, the most shamefully neglected Americans of all; college students and their families, who wonder if they'll ever be able to afford college; people who are sick or who may become sick--and that's every American--fearful not only about the quality of care they'll get in this harsh, new, "bottom-line" market health-care system we're struggling in...but fearful, too, about whether they'll be able to afford any medical care at all.

And it's about giving voice to our people who worry about the quality of our air, our food and water supply--and all Americans do--and about the array of other public services all Americans depend on, sometimes even without knowing it.

That's what organizing is all about. That's what this union is about. For when we enable the people we represent to have voice and to participate in the constant improvement of the policies and practices underlying the institutions in which we work, all Americans benefit.

We know, of course, that being strong in numbers won't accomplish that by itself. We also need to be a strong union, and that means building a better union--a union that's more effective at every level of our organization.

This past year, we've begun some efforts in the national office to help our affiliates and the national to do just that. For example, many of you heard me at our QuEST Conference last summer, when I asked our members not to support the perpetuation of schools that weren't serving children well, schools we wouldn't send our own children to. Well, our locals have been working hard at redesigning low-performing schools since then. We held a very successful conference for union and management teams from eight districts across the country, shared best

practices and procedures, and got important programs started from coast to coast, so that now, drastic school change is being accomplished through cooperation.

We issued a report on social promotion that exposed the problem and changed the unproductive debate about it. It's not whether unprepared kids are simply moved on or simply left back. The issue is getting kids early, timely, and appropriate help. Now, districts--with Chicago in the lead--are beginning to do that. And President Clinton and Secretary Riley took notice of our work and provided leadership to enhance those efforts.

Our state federation advisory committee report laid out guidelines to help our affiliates at union-building. Our PSRP task force did the same. All our constituencies are working at taking on new roles and responsibilities--from protecting whistle-blowers in health care to helping to ensure, through our reading resolution, that every third grader can read.

We've also expanded our public relations and advertising efforts. The column now has broader reach, and we've added radio spots. And we're making plans to do more, including more use of technology to reach our members, as well as a wider audience.

I know that it is not always comfortable for us to take on new roles. I know that many of these responsibilities are really "management's problem."

Well, sisters and brothers, if management in public education, in health care, in our colleges and universities, and in state and local services were dealing with their problems more effectively, we'd all be in better shape. But they are not. And the fact is, their problems have become our problems--the problem of whether or not we'll have public education and public services; the problem of whether or not we'll have a thriving middle class and the possibility of mobility into it. And these issues are so profound that we simply don't have the option of turning our backs.

Besides, we know our members want us front and center on these issues. They want us to take on new responsibilities, to give them the help they need to do the job. They want us to take a leading role in improving public education, health care, and public services.

Unfortunately, we can't do it alone. We need a partnership with management--and that's another challenge, one we can't entirely control, but one we have to work at. Because when they mess up--and too often they do--we all go down with them.

But remember: This union has always gone beyond its traditional responsibilities. We've been training teachers, and now paras, on best practices through ER&D; we've been a leader in standards; in discipline; in teacher quality; and much more. And I'll have a lot more to say about teacher quality soon.

And when we can use our knowledge and skills to help management do a better job, improvement takes place. Sometimes, it even gets recognized.

I was very proud, on your behalf, at a recent meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. The mayors of Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and elsewhere loudly praised their teachers' unions, saying they couldn't have gone so far on school improvement without you. Not that everything is always hunky-dory. But when school superintendents and elected officials are working with us, and together we're making progress, then you can have conflicts, get past them, and continue the work.

And much good work is getting done by the people in this room and those we represent.

Still, despite all we're accomplishing...despite some terrific signs of progress in the institutions we work in...despite the growing recognition, even among political figures who are not our natural friends, that our expertise and experience are crucial...I don't think I can remember a more difficult time for us. And I know that in the past 20 years, we have been living through very tough times for working families and children--especially children. And that struggle is far from over, even in these relatively better economic times.

Because as America--indeed, the world--undergoes a global economic transformation that is even more monumental than the Industrial Revolution, we are facing huge questions:

What kind of country will we become? Which ideals and commitments will we carry into the future? Will the greatest democratic experiment in the history of the world--an experiment that created the greatest middle class and the greatest equality of opportunity on earth--will it survive this transformation or will it succumb?

Will the new market economy bring new freedom and prosperity to our children? Or will its cold, impersonal forces be allowed to grind up their future?

Will America act to temper the brutal aspects of this change? Will human dignity, hope, and the conditions necessary for a civic society to thrive be preserved, even as we embrace change?

Or will we continue to allow the neglect that millions of children already suffer--and thereby sacrifice everything we ever stood for and strived for?

These may sound like abstract questions. But they are not. As I've traveled around the country, meeting with people, listening carefully, these are the kinds of questions that Americans are asking, in more practical and even more poignant terms:

"Will we have a good job tomorrow? Will we be 'downsized' and have to consider ourselves lucky if we're forced to take many part-time jobs at wages that can't sustain our family? We believe in 'family values,' but how do we offer our children a family life when we're running twice as hard just to stay even?"

"Will our neighborhood have decent schools? Will we be able to afford college for our kids? Will there be decent jobs for them, even if they do all the right things and get an education?"

"Will they be able to own the modest kind of house that we're struggling to maintain? What happens if we get sick? Will we be cared for, and will it wipe us out?"

"Will there be Social Security--any security for us and our children at all?"

Like most working and middle-class Americans, our members are facing these anxieties and asking these questions, too.

As a union, we know that the question is no longer "whither public education?" We can handle that. We know that big changes are necessary, and we're ready, willing, and able to make them, even if it means doing things very differently; we and our members have always been willing to embrace change--so long as it carries forward the cherished ideals of public education and our democracy, so long as it helps this nation make good on them.

But the question we're hearing isn't "whither public education" but whether--a question never raised before in America. That it could be asked at all is stunning. That the answer could be "no" has consequences too terrible to contemplate.

So let me say to the privatization demagogues: Our opposition to vouchers, to putting education on a market basis, is not out of narrow union interest. It is not about losing members. In fact, we have lots of reasons to believe we'd organize and grow. No, our opposition to vouchers is out of our interest in children and democracy!

It is because we do not believe for a minute that our public schools are hopeless or that a market system of education would work. We do not believe that it could deliver opportunity and quality to the vast majority of Americans, or that it offers the best hope for poor children, or that it would preserve and strengthen our democracy.

And we will fight to the last against putting the education of our children on a market basis--as if our children were no more than fast food--because the worst public schools in America today would look good compared to what a market system of schools would usher in!

And it's because our democracy cannot stand if all our children do not have an absolute right to get educated. Remember: Education is first and foremost about the capacity to safeguard our liberties. If educating our children depends on a roll of the dice and the condition of some school entrepreneur's bottom line, then this country cannot be the kind of democracy we've cherished and always strived to improve!

This is what our union stands against. And we're proud of it!

The same goes for higher education, for health care, and our vital public services. Our members are ready, willing, and able to tackle how this nation improves efficiency while preserving quality, access, and affordability for all Americans. It's not change we're afraid of; we're leading it, including doing things that are traditionally uncomfortable for unions to do.

No. What has ordinary Americans so anxious and our members so concerned is not "whither" higher education, health care, and public services. It's whether access and quality will be afforded to the vast majority of Americans!

We say it must, and that it can be! We say that our new economy does not require a shrinking middle class and an end to hope and opportunity for the poor. We don't buy the theory that the impersonal workings of the market will make everything all right--and if it doesn't, tough luck, it's your fault or your children's fault. Because what happens to this country is not about impersonal forces; it's about the decisions that we, as a people, make.

If we ever needed a better recent example, just look at President Clinton's leadership on behalf of the earned income tax credit. Thanks to our President and his allies--and we're proud to be among them--tens of thousands of Americans who were below the poverty level even though they were working, many of them at more than one job, now have some security and hope. Thanks to the earned income tax credit, America's childhood poverty rate has been reduced two percentage points.

Tragically, it's still the highest in the advanced world. But the lesson here is that there's nothing inevitable about childhood poverty in America. It's not something we have to live with because of "impersonal" market forces--and it certainly won't be cured by those forces. That break in

childhood poverty was the result of human decisions, moral decisions, the enlightened leadership of a President and a labor movement working on behalf of all Americans. That's the kind of change our union stands for--and we're proud of it!

You know, brothers and sisters, unions do fight certain so-called changes--the kinds of changes that keep our children poor and hopeless, the kinds of changes that tear at the very fabric of our society and at everything that's decent.

But when our critics say that unions just don't like a private market economy or that we have our heads in the sand about global economic change, they are dead wrong.

For starters, if it weren't for us, and the AFL-CIO, the Soviet Union might still be standing.

They are dead wrong, because our members built America's market economy, benefit from it, and spend their professional lives trying to help others participate in it successfully.

It is the kind of society many of our critics want--one in which everything is subordinated to markets--that is anathema to us. This nation cannot withstand an end to public education, public services, decent health care, some measure of job stability, family life, political participation for all, safety nets, and security. That is no society at all; that is a jungle. And that is what unions, this union, protect against. And if ever that role was necessary, it is today.

Today, it is more necessary than ever because there are people with unlimited resources who want to dismantle government--not make it work more effectively. They want to dismantle it, period. They want to end an effective voice for ordinary Americans in the political process. And since we and the rest of labor stand in the way of that, they want to dismantle us.

Nothing illustrates this better than Proposition 226 in California--the so-called Paycheck Protection Act. Talk about an Orwellian use of language! Because we all know that this ballot initiative should have been called the "Death-to-the-Political-Participation-of-Ordinary-Americans Act."

Isn't it ironic that all those people who extol competition don't really want competition among views and interests at all? Because shutting out unions is shutting up the voice of ordinary Americans. And isn't it interesting that the individuals and money--big money--behind Proposition 226 are also behind vouchers, behind putting health care totally on a market basis, behind the attack on government as the problem?

From our perspective, this was a classic good versus evil battle, folks.

And the spectacular news is: The good guys won. We defeated Proposition 226!

We won because we did it the old-fashioned, democratic way: organizing, making alliances, tapping into the grass roots, contacting our members and the public, explaining, responding. It was because all of labor--the AFL-CIO, the AFT, and the NEA--pitched in. And because we did that, and because our members and ordinary citizens are very, very smart, we won! The labor voice for public education, for decent health care, for fairness in America will still be out there, loud and clear.

But the war is far from over. It doesn't take an advanced degree to see that. Look out over the political landscape, with vouchers looming on the horizon, going to a possibly sympathetic

Supreme Court, with privatization and anti-unionism growing.... We face many more tough political struggles, and they will call on everything we've got. And we will give it.

But the plain fact is, the dangerous forces gathering in our country couldn't be getting the audience they're getting if there weren't some deep problems in our institutions, problems that are as discernible to parents and the public as they are to us.

I want to concentrate here on our schools, our kids. But I think you'll find that what I'm saying also applies to those of you in colleges and in health care and in public services. Because the attacks on public education are similar to the attacks being made on other vital services and institutions, and even against any positive role for government, at all.

And in order to overcome them, it is absolutely imperative that we take an even more active role--yes, even more active--in improving our schools and restoring the public's hope and confidence in them.

Now, believe me, I know how hard you already work--not only at regular responsibilities but on all sorts of issues affecting children and education that we never thought we'd have to take on; after all, we don't run the schools. I know, because it was only yesterday that I, too, was a local leader, and that experience is in my gut. I know how tough it is. I know about the serious problems facing our members and our children, about caring so much and being strained beyond the limit.

I also know that you don't get a fraction of the credit you deserve for what you're doing on behalf of children and better public schools in your local districts and states. You don't get credit for your persistence and courage on discipline or your leadership on high standards, not only for students but for teachers and paraprofessionals; no credit for your ongoing fight for smaller class size; your whistle-blowing on social promotion; your fights to stop the ill-founded fads and fashions that blow in and out of our schools and your work to pick up the pieces; and so much more.

But for the sake of everything we believe in and the good this country stands for, we've got to keep on working--even harder and smarter. That goes for the national, our locals, and our state affiliates--every level of the union.

So we're going to be even more aggressive in taking our case--the case for children--to parents and the public. Because the common-sense solutions they seek are exactly what we seek and know how to achieve.

And we must take the lead with superintendents and school boards, mayors, and governors. We won't wait for them to ask for our help in turning around our schools. We'll get to them first with our knowledge, experience, and creativity.

And we must be tenacious. If they turn us down, as some have done, for very poor reasons, we'll go back, again and again--with parents and other allies behind us--to press our case for children.

We must do everything within our power to make turning around low-performing schools--improving all schools--the top agenda of every community in this nation! And we will do it in the common-sense ways the public, parents, our members, and the research all support.

Now, having said that, it also must be said that, while there are serious problems, the idea that all our public schools are failing is simply wrong, terribly wrong. It's demagoguery, pure and simple.

You know, most parents --and I'll get to the important exceptions later--are satisfied with their children's schools. And I think it's because most parents know first hand that their kids are getting a very good education. They see how dedicated and hard-working teachers are. They see teachers stepping into the breach created by stressed-out parents and the lack of community activities for children, from our suburbs to our inner cities. And they know their children are learning.

Could we be doing better? Absolutely. But the idea that we have a failing public school system is simply outrageous.

The same goes for the charge that all the public schools serving poor children are failing, or that we've made no progress since "A Nation at Risk."

The plain truth is that, thanks to you, our children, including our poor children, have made great progress.

Just a few weeks ago, in a report that got little attention, the Census Bureau found that 86 percent of young blacks between the ages of 25 and 29 were high school graduates--86 percent compared to 87 percent of whites. That's a statistically insignificant difference. That's tremendous progress! In 1965, it was 50 percent of blacks and 73 percent of whites.

Notice that I'm talking about 25- to 29-year-olds; they've long been out of high school. Today, our high school dropout rate is down to single digits, including in many of our toughest neighborhoods! And while the dropout rate of our Hispanic students is still greater than that of their peers, here, too, the trend is going in the right direction.

What makes this progress so commendable is that we did it during a period of time when, in large part thanks to us, state after state and district after district were raising standards, raising graduation requirements, and putting in new, more demanding tests! And our students are rising to the challenge.

You'd never know it from reading the newspapers, but test scores on both are up, with the increase in many of our cities exceeding even state and national averages. SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement test scores are up. Many more students, particularly minority children, are taking the tests--and they're doing better than ever.

Let me give you just a small sample of the good news:

Here in New Orleans, the number of students taking the SAT increased 117 percent from 1995 to 1997.

The ACT scores of high school seniors in Pittsburgh last year exceeded the national average.

In Hartford, Connecticut, with all their problems, even the New York Times reported that "city students are inching closer and closer to their suburban counterparts in meeting state education goals...."

In New York City, according to the Public Education Network, "there has been measurable improvement in reading and mathematics, across the several boroughs and, most markedly, in New York's poorest inner-city schools." New York's elementary and middle school students even outpaced the rate of growth of students statewide.

Chicago: According to the Illinois Board of Education, Chicago schools are improving on state criteria at a faster rate than the state as a whole.

Listen to the news about Texas: In 1993, only one of every four African American students passed all sections of the new and harder Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. Less than one of every three Hispanic students passed the entire test. By 1996, almost fifty percent of African American students and 55 percent of Hispanic students passed all sections of the test. Do we have a way to go? Absolutely. But as the Public Education Network said, what happened in Texas "represents dramatic change and extraordinary progress."

And the same can be said of Miami, Boston, Minneapolis, San Francisco...and many, many of the other districts in which we work!

Education reform is working! Academic standards and requirements are up, student attendance is up, dropout rates are down, and our students are achieving at much higher levels.

And what is particularly extraordinary is that we've taken our children this far despite America's childhood poverty rate--I repeat, the highest in the industrialized world. We've taken our children this far even though entry-level wages for male high school graduates, for example, fell 28 percent from 1973 to 1997. And even the prosperous times during this period didn't stop the free fall. And we know that while our children may not know these statistics, they know very well that even if they do everything right, their future may not include a living wage.

Just look at the example of college to see how cruelly economic circumstances are treating even the kids who are doing everything right. In the past few years, thanks to our kids rising to the challenge of higher standards, our colleges are reporting much better prepared applicants, especially among minority students. And yet the college-going rate of minority students is decreasing, and not just at institutions that have stopped affirmative action. The kids simply can't afford the tuition.

And look at the difference between the high school and college graduation rates of minorities. With high school graduation, minorities have closed the gap with whites. But with college graduation, while the gap has narrowed, it remains very wide.

Here's what the Wall Street Journal--not exactly our friend--has to say about why. I quote: "Analysts say the difference between the high school and college graduation results has a lot to do with money. High school, of course, is available for most students free of charge."

What a surprise!

So the progress of our children and public schools is amazing, especially given the economic circumstances I've described. It's astonishing, given the lack of support teachers endure and the awful neglect so many of our students suffer. And our progress ought to make us proud and all Americans hopeful. Because if we've come this far--notwithstanding poverty, vicious politics, and persistent efforts to keep this nation from carrying out the reforms that really work--think of

what could be accomplished if our elected leaders and school authorities really got serious about putting reform in place!

Now, we in the AFT are second to none in caring about a first-rate education for all our kids! And we are second to none on high standards and the work we've done to bring them to realization. And we have never covered up the bad news about our schools; quite the opposite.

So let me say this bluntly. The work on improving our public schools is far from done. And it is not moving far and fast enough.

We cannot be content, even with the performance of our advantaged kids, because they and their schools could be doing much better.

And, most especially and emphatically, we cannot be content that there are many public schools where poor children are doing very well. Because, despite substantial progress, the gap in achievement between advantaged and poor children continues to be unacceptable. And we cannot be content while too many poor parents are dissatisfied with their children's schools.

Remember: There is a concerted effort going on in this country to convince Americans that leaving the majority of kids behind is an act of kindness rather than an assault on children, that our only obligation to poor children is to select a handful of the so-called "deserving poor," leave them to the mercies of a lottery, and to hell with the rest.

The battle against this cynical idea, this abandonment of a future for each and every child, is a battle that can't be won only in the political arena--though we intend to redouble our efforts at political action, just as we did in California over Proposition 226.

But the ultimate weapon, the only enduring way to win, is to raise all children's achievement and to close the achievement gap, to make every school a school we'd gladly send our own children to.

So, together, we're going to commit to increasing the number of locals that are concentrating on turning around low-performing schools.

We're going to push harder to equip all our locals, our schools, and our members with the information and tools necessary to do what works for children.

We're going to figure out how to put before our members and school officials the extraordinary work the AFT has done on putting together the best knowledge about teaching reading and turning that knowledge into practice. I hope all of you read this summer's American Educator on reading from cover to cover.

We're going to redouble our efforts to take our case, the case for children, to parents and the public--in print, on the airwaves, and at community forums. Because when our natural allies are activated, we'll be even more effective in our efforts to put in place the reforms that really work for kids.

And just as our nurses have done to expose unsafe and unhealthy conditions in hospitals, together, we're going to blow the whistle more publicly on every incompetent administrator, misspent dollar, ill-founded school experiment, rotten, so-called professional development program...on every failure to back up higher standards with a curriculum or put in place a good

reading program and whatever else is necessary to prevent poor public school management, where it exists, from jeopardizing the future of our kids and public education.

And I pledge the support of the AFT to every local that does this.

So let me repeat my challenge--it's an invitation, really--to superintendents and school boards, to mayors, governors, and state legislators, to U.S. senators and representatives. Sit down and work with us. We and our members want children to succeed. And if you do, too--if the success of children, rather than a political agenda, is your bottom line, then together we can get the job done.

I want to turn now to the latest issue to be caught up in political agendas: teacher quality. Later, this Convention will take up a resolution on teacher quality that will cover more than I can talk about here. I hope it will pass because it represents the finest of the truth-seeking, risk-taking AFT tradition. I urge all of you to study it.

I'll start with teacher incompetence and the tenure issue--not because it's the greatest problem in teacher quality; it is not.

But make no mistake about it: Even one incompetent teacher is too much for the children she teaches, the parents she faces, the members who get her students in subsequent grades...and, frankly, for the good of our union.

So let me state unequivocally: We believe all students have the right to a high-quality teacher...a teacher who both knows her subject matter and how to teach it, who both cares about children and knows how they learn. And we believe that the union has a responsibility to help ensure that the members of our profession meet high standards.

But the idea that ending tenure--eliminating due process for teachers--is the way to ensure a quality teaching force is ludicrous. Teachers are entitled to fair dismissal procedures, to protection from arbitrary, capricious, and unreasonable dismissals. Moreover, children and the public also need to be protected from schemes to replace competent, experienced teachers with unqualified but cheaper labor--or someone's relative.

The fact is, this nation doesn't have to choose between teacher quality or the individual rights of teachers, which also protects teacher quality. We need to do both. We can do both.

So let me propose a partnership on behalf of teacher quality. Because, again, we can't do it alone--and political and school officials have certainly demonstrated they can't do it.

First, instead of capitalizing on dismissal proceedings that are time consuming, costly, inefficient, and more adversarial than professional, let's streamline them and professionalize them, as we've already done in a number of states and districts. Let's use these model laws and contracts.

Second, instead of blaming seniority rules for all the ills of the world and proposing to give principals sole discretion over hiring, let's treat teachers as professionals and involve them in the hiring process. Instead of trying to end rules established to protect against arbitrary and capricious decisions, let's make sure that a teacher's qualifications and demonstrated fit with a school's educational philosophy or program are what count. We have such schools. We have contract language that achieves this goal.

Third, instead of capitalizing on lousy, top-down teacher evaluation systems that make it too easy to get tenured, that are indifferent about teachers who are falling down on the job and offer no assistance to teachers who need help, let's negotiate a peer review and intervention program. Because believe me, no one is more knowledgeable and rigorous about teacher performance than first-rate teachers!

We pioneered peer review and intervention. Many of our locals are doing it. It works, not only in our eyes but according to the experts on teacher evaluation. Yet negotiation is a two-way street. We can't ram even the most effective programs down management's throat; believe me, we've tried. Let's negotiate.

Fourth, instead of allowing new teachers to sink or swim, let's set up teacher internship programs. They work. Yes, they cost money. But those costs are nothing compared to the cost of the talent we lose in the first, difficult year of teaching because no one is there to help. Those costs are nothing compared to the education that's lost to children when the new struggling teachers they happen to have are sinkers rather than swimmers.

Fifth, make schools learning communities for teachers, as well as for students. Provide for master teachers, teacher centers, real professional development in the schools --with time for teachers to work with one another to overcome children's learning problems as they come up.

My last point is really the first. Because, our teacher quality problem is far more of a future problem than a current one. Our teaching force is "maturing." We are on our way to replacing two million teachers. Who will these new teachers be?

We've seen progress on more rigorous licensing standards. Now, we also have advanced certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Those high standards are beginning to be reflected in teacher education and licensing requirements, including testing, for new teachers. Teacher quality is on everyone's mind, as well it should be.

But so long as state and local education authorities continue to issue emergency credentials and to misassign teachers into subjects they are not qualified to teach, higher standards will be a fiction.

So let me issue my final challenge for a partnership on behalf of teacher quality: Instead of blaming teacher unions for policies we didn't create and don't defend, instead of blaming us for mistakes we didn't make and don't defend in hiring, promotion, or tenure, end emergency credentials and the misassignment of teachers now! Let us end politics as usual as we face preparing and hiring two million new teachers.

You know, there are people who want to do away with standards for teachers altogether, who mock the need for teacher education and for licensing requirements, who consider certification a desire on our part for bureaucratic control--nutty as that may be. They like to tell us that teaching standards are keeping brilliant historians out of our schools, or retirees from the military and aerospace industry, or Warren Buffett, or --my personal favorite--Albert Einstein.

By the way, I don't see any of the folks who say this lining up to teach in our public schools.

Well, Albert Einstein just happened to be a proud and active AFT member. And he would have been the first to tell us that, when it comes to teaching children, it's simply not enough just to

know your subject matter well; you also have to know how to teach it to children. It's not either/or; the two go hand in hand.

Einstein also would have pointed out--not just because he was a good union member, but because he also had common sense--that if you want qualified math or science or other teachers in our schools, you'll need to pay them.

Isn't it curious that those who love to talk about markets and about competition NEVER talk about a competitive salary, a fair market price for teachers?

Now, the AFT is on record in support of good alternative certification programs. We also want to see standards in the traditional route raised. We like to see retired military folks in our schools; in fact, we proposed such a program to Congress, and it's in effect. We like to see poets and artists in our schools. And we welcome scientists and mathematicians now working elsewhere into our classrooms.

But they, just like other teachers, ought to demonstrate that they know their subject matter. They, even more than new teachers--who at least have had student-teaching experience--ought to be under the supervision of expert teachers during their first year of teaching. And, if they decide to make teaching their career, they, just like other teachers, should demonstrate that they know how to teach--not for our sake, but for the sake of their students.

But really, isn't all this talk about John Hope Franklin or Warren Buffett or Albert Einstein being kept out of our schools because of teaching standards just a red herring?

Let's face it, every profession and trade has licensing requirements, from doctor, lawyer, architect, or accountant to plumber and cosmetologist. Don't our kids deserve standards, too, for the people who serve them? Doesn't the public's interest in education need to be protected just as much as the public's interest in health or in buildings and bridges that don't fall down?

Isn't the real story, the one no one wants to talk about, a story about how, in districts where attracting teachers has become a chronic problem, alternative certification doesn't get us many geniuses or poets or even a modest number of Teach for America kids?

The truth is, in places that have the toughest conditions and pay the least--translation: the schools serving our poorest, neediest children--teaching standards aren't the problem. The problem is the chronic undermining of those standards through "emergency" credentials and misassignment of teachers to classes they aren't trained to teach. That's our teacher quality problem!

Let's face it. Emergency licenses and teacher misassignment have created a structural teacher quality deficit in this country. And this ought to be taken as seriously as the budget deficit has been.

And the elimination or lowering of standards for entry into the profession in any school, including charter schools or voucher schools, can only make it worse.

Now, I say to governors and mayors and school boards: We can either work together to solve this problem, for the sake of the children, or you can do what the governor of Massachusetts did: create a diversion from the disgrace of lowering standards for incoming teachers by attacking the teachers already in place.

What did that accomplish? Nothing but a smokescreen of conflict to cover up a basic problem: a structural teacher quality deficit that most affects our neediest children.

So let me repeat my challenge to state and local education authorities: If you're really serious about teacher quality, stop undercutting even the standards we have now. Stop creating and perpetuating a structural teacher quality deficit into the next century. This school year, put an end to emergency credentials and the misassignment of teachers.

This is not a proposal lightly made. Because if it is implemented, we would have a crisis in many schools. I should say, a more visible, more difficult-to-deal-with crisis than we have at present. Because we would have many classrooms throughout some of our cities that go not only without teachers, but without babysitters. And the structural teacher quality deficit would be shamefully exposed.

But we cannot allow this problem to continue. And we cannot allow state and local education authorities, and others, to get off the hook with talk about how they can't precipitate a crisis. Like I said, this already is a crisis, especially for our neediest children.

So, to avoid any excuses--and because it's the right thing for us to do--I also call on our affiliates and on our members to help get through such a crisis by negotiating ways to accommodate the additional shortages until qualified teachers are found.

Here are some examples of solutions that can be negotiated:

One, offer incentives to experienced teachers seeking to retire so they will stay longer.

Two, offer flexible scheduling and part-time teaching to retirees or teachers presently on child-care leave.

Three, offer incentives for teachers to become certified in an additional field, such as a shortage field.

Four, make sure that the liberal arts graduates, the retirees or career-switchers from other fields, and others willing to teach--the historians and Einsteins--take and pass entry-level exams that regular teachers are required to pass. And then provide them with training before they practice on kids. We can help.

Five, have them, and all new teachers, be mentored by master teachers. Many of our contracts already include such programs.

Six, ask qualified teachers now working in shortage areas to voluntarily take on additional classes--with appropriate additional pay, of course. And give teachers the autonomy and flexibility to arrange classes of different sizes among themselves. Many contracts already provide for this.

Seven, recruit paraprofessionals with college credits and offer more support for them to obtain teaching credentials.

Eight, put qualified supervisors and administrators into the classroom.

Nine, allow the parents of children in classrooms without qualified teachers to transfer their children to another classroom or public school in the district that has enough qualified teachers.

Ten, find a way, in this upturned economy, to raise teachers' salaries, particularly where they are lowest, to put the profession where it belongs in a hierarchy of values--to show that education matters, that children matter in America.

Let us stop the forays and skirmishes over demonstrably ineffective and conflict-producing measures, like meaningless recertification or threatening teacher due process rights, or seeking union-free environments or vouchers for a few.

Let us provide what the millions upon millions of children need and deserve in America--free and equal access to high-quality public education.

This is my challenge to those who run public education--the state and local officials, the boards of education, the superintendents--and to our own local and state unions:

Measure every school by the highest standard: Would I want my own child to be there?

And, in addition to all the other school improvement efforts we are making and working on together--high standards, good discipline, programs that work--together, let's take this basic step: enforce high entry standards into the teaching profession, so that as we face the next century, the children of America--no matter their parents' wealth, no matter the wealth or status of their neighborhood--have truly equal access to this essential element of a good education: well-educated, qualified teachers in their classrooms.

I believe this great country of ours will face up to the challenges before us and do the right thing for children, families, and all Americans. I know that our great union will continue to pursue our proud and worthy tradition. It is a privilege to be the president of the AFT. I thank you, I salute you, and I look forward to a terrific Convention and a year whose challenges we will meet together.