

PASSING ON FAILURE

*Social promotion is not the
way to help children who have
fallen behind.*

BY SANDRA FELDMAN

AS YOU know, I was recently elected president of the American Federation of Teachers. Some of you also know me as a local union leader in a "small town" called New York City, where I've spent countless hours in schools talking to teachers and kids. I know the problems of poor urban districts *very* well. So it doesn't seem strange when a place like New York decides to have a big literacy push to make sure that all our students leave third grade able to read. It's an idea we've supported for some time.

But it knocked my socks off when I heard the President of the United States, in his State of the Union address, hold out as a *national* goal that every child will be able to read well by the end of third grade.

Frankly, I was embarrassed. How is it that the President of the wealthiest, greatest nation in the world has to talk about universal third-grade literacy as a national goal? And what did that actually mean, given that American kids, on average, were in the top tier on the 1992 International Assessment of Reading, and that our fourth graders were at the very top this year in science in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study?

What it means, really, is that a substantial portion of our poor kids—and in America more than 20 percent of kids are poor—can't read as they should. And when you can't read properly, you can't learn as you should in other subjects, either.

Now poor children, especially urban children, are people I know well. Very well. Not only was I one of them, but I've spent my entire adult life among them. I

Sandra Feldman is president of the American Federation of Teachers. She delivered this speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on September 9. The results from the national survey on school district promotion policies and practices are drawn from a new report prepared by the AFT Educational Issues Department, as are the sidebars that accompany this article. For copies of the full report, see ordering information on p. 8.

know what problems they have and the burdens they bring to school. And I also know that the schools they attend, rather than getting more, get less. But I also know that, short of situations of serious damage, urban kids are perfectly capable of reading well and doing well in school in general.

So how does it happen that a child gets beyond third grade without solid skills in reading or math? How could it happen that a youngster could reach twelfth grade, let alone graduate from high school, without solid skills in reading, writing, and math? How did it happen that colleges have to offer remedial courses and businesses have to spend millions teaching new employees basic skills?

Good questions.

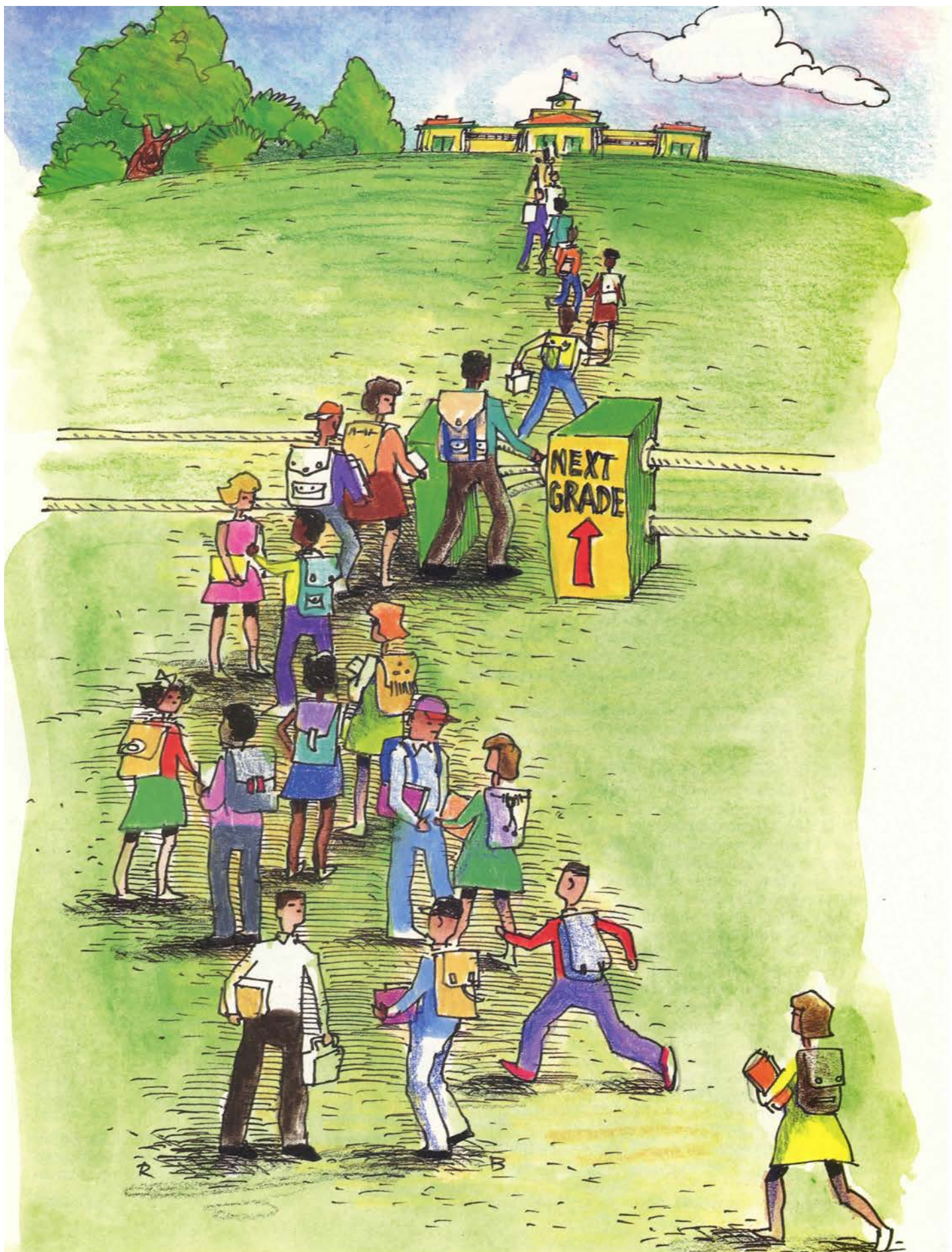
Now, we in the AFT spend a lot of time listening to our members, so we had a pretty good sense of the answers. And one of the persistent answers we were hearing was "social promotion"—the practice of sending students on to the next grade even though they weren't really ready.

But we wanted to check on what we were hearing. So, as part of our ongoing push for higher standards of conduct and achievement, we decided to conduct a national survey about student promotion policies. I am here today with the results of this AFT survey, the first such national survey ever conducted. We collected promotion policies from eighty-five districts across the country, including the forty largest. And we now have much clearer answers about why the richest nation on earth has to set a goal of all children reading well by the end of third grade and about why a youngster can graduate from high school without a solid foundation in the basic skills necessary to lead a productive life.

What did we find? We found that no district has an explicit policy of social promotion. That was odd. Were our members wrong? Could Chicago and other districts that are now banning social promotion be banning something that doesn't exist?

Not at all.

Because we also found that just about every district



Social Promotion: Everyone Loses

AS CRITICS point out, social promotion is an insidious practice that hides school failure and creates problems for everybody:

■ **For kids**, who are deluded into thinking they have learned the knowledge and skills necessary for success, who get the message that effort and achievement do not count, and most important, who often are denied access to the resources and support programs they need because their failure is not acknowledged by the system.

■ **For teachers**, who must deal with impossibly wide disparities in their students' preparation and achievement that result from social promotion, and who face students who know that teachers wield no credible authority to demand hard work.

■ **For parents**, who are lulled into thinking that their children are being adequately prepared for college, for civic responsibility, and for the world of work.

■ **For the business community**, which must invest millions of dollars in teaching new employees the basic skills they did not learn in school.

■ **For colleges and universities**, which must spend a sizeable portion of their budgets on remedial courses to prepare high school graduates to do college-level work, and for the professors who must lower their standards in order to accommodate an ill-prepared student body.

■ **For taxpayers**, whose support of public education is eroded by evidence that a high school diploma is not necessarily a guarantee of basic literacy and numeracy.

■ **For society**, in general, which cannot afford, in both economic and civic terms, a growing proportion of uneducated citizens who neither benefit from, nor contribute to, the commonweal.

has an *implicit* policy of social promotion. Almost all districts say that holding students back must be the option of last resort—which is a clear message to promote socially—and many of them also put explicit limits on retaining students—which is another clear message to promote socially.

For example, about one-half of the districts restrict the number of times a student can be retained. In Orange County, Florida, only one retention is permitted in elementary school. Houston restricts retention to once in kindergarten through fourth grade and once in fifth through eighth grade.

Still other districts essentially forbid retaining certain children, like students with limited English proficiency or learning disabilities, saying that these students are to be moved along according to "a pace that is appropriate to their abilities"—whatever that means.

Another major answer our survey revealed about why a student can leave third grade without reading well or graduate from high school without solid knowledge and skills is that, in most districts, *there*

In most districts, there are no agreed-upon standards defining what students should know and be able to do at various grade levels.



are no agreed-upon standards defining what students should know and be able to do at various grade levels.

As a result, there are no clear criteria for whether or not a student should be promoted. Instead, we see vague policies like Clark County, Nevada's: To be promoted, a student's "progress should be continuous and student advancement through the curriculum should be according to the student's demonstrated ability."

What does *that* mean?

Or take the policy of the Long Beach, Calif., School District: Promotion depends on a student's ability to "demonstrate sufficient growth in learning required basic skills." But what is "sufficient?" The policy is silent. And is "sufficient growth" the same as mastery? The policy gives no clue.

So how *are* promotion decisions made? We found that, in most districts, a student's grades in class and on standardized tests, along with teacher recommen-

datations, form the basis for promotion decisions.

Sounds sensible. But think about it: In the absence of clear, grade-by-grade standards for what students should know and be able to do, class grades are based on different things and, therefore, vary greatly. Some teachers grade based on student mastery; other emphasize effort; still others look at mastery or effort relative to perceived student ability; and still others may use different combinations of these. And the result is that some students arrive in the next grade unprepared for work at that level, even though they may have gotten A's and B's.

Standardized tests are also not a good guide to promotion decisions. First, they are not generally reliable when young children are involved. And second, they often aren't aligned with the curriculum—that is, with what the students have been taught.

That brings us to teacher recommendations, presumably the third leg of the three-legged stool that constitutes promotion decisions. But our survey revealed that this third leg is very shaky indeed: While teachers *participate* in promotion decisions in the majority of districts we surveyed, they have little *authority* over the decision. They have final authority at the elementary or middle school level in only *two* districts, and final authority at the high school level in only *one* district. In fact, more districts give parents final authority over a student's promotion than they do teachers!

In the majority of districts, final authority for promotion decisions rests with the principal. And here, once again, we see the effects of not having clear standards for students. Because in the absence of standards, teachers who grade strictly may have little support—and grades become negotiable. Principals can overturn a teacher's recommendation or change her grades. And, frequently, they do, either because they don't want the school to look bad or because of parent or

district pressure. Sometimes, it's because the resources aren't there to hold over too many children.

In fact, in a separate poll of teachers we conducted some time ago, we found that, although teachers are opposed to social promotion, they, like many principals, feel uneasy about retention because usually there are no options for the students—no program that's different and helpful, not even summer school, in many cases. And children who are retained without any extra help or different programs often continue to do poorly. It's a terrible bind.

AND THAT brings me to the next major finding of our survey: In the majority of districts we looked at, promotion policies are generally silent about providing special help to students who fail, or who are at risk of failing, or who are socially promoted.

Only about 15 percent mention tutoring; and only about 13 percent mention alternative programs and strategies, such as transitional classes, extended instructional time, customized instructional programs or other support services. About one-half of the promotion policies mention summer school, but discussions with school officials and union leaders indicate that in many instances funds to support summer school have been cut drastically, if not eliminated. In some districts, students must pay to attend summer school!

Now, some of you may be thinking, "Special programs may be nice, but they're costly. Isn't the solution simple? Clearly, if we don't want social promotion—and we don't—then retention is the answer."

....Which brings me to the last major finding from our survey: Ironically, and painfully, it turns out that not only is social *promotion* rampant, retention is, too. Despite the restrictions on holding back students, retention is used as often as it can be. Accurate figures are hard to get, but it is estimated that 15 percent to

Teachers' Role in Promotion Decisions

THE ROLE teachers play in social promotion decisions is complicated. Teachers do not like social promotion, but they are ambivalent about retaining students. Ninety-four percent of teachers in a recent survey* agreed with the statements: "...promoting students who are not truly prepared creates a burden for the receiving teachers and classmates. Automatic promotion inevitably brings down standards and impedes education." Yet, 54 percent of those same teachers indicated that they had promoted unprepared students in the past year. Why? Our polls indicate:

- Teachers do not have the authority to retain students.
- Teachers succumb to pressure from principals and parents to promote students that the teachers consider to be unprepared. Six in 10 teachers indicate that teachers in their school are pressured by principals and other administrators not to retain students, while 52 percent say parental pressure is a problem.
- Teachers fear that when students are retained, they will cause behavior and discipline problems in class.
- Teachers know that there is already a significant amount of retention occurring in schools.
- Teachers believe that the educational research indicates that retention is both harmful and ineffective.
- Teachers believe that there are insufficient educational alternatives to social promotion or retention for youngsters who do not master the grade-level material. They see their dilemma as having to choose between two unsatisfactory alternatives. Teachers often know that retention may result in students' repeating the same material, taught with the same instructional strategies that were ineffectual for those students in the first instance. To recommend retention in such a situation is not only a violation of all that teachers know about how children develop and learn, but it also lends support to what teachers perceive as a fundamental problem—the failure on the part of the administration to develop and support alternatives and prevention programs for children at risk of failure.

*Peter D. Hart Associates. *Academic Standards and Student Discipline: AFT Teachers Assess Their Schools*, 1996.

Why Students Fail

A VERY SMALL percentage of children fail because they do not have the innate capacity to acquire the complex knowledge and skills required for functioning in today's information age. The vast majority of children are unsuccessful in school for other, more complicated reasons.

- Some children don't prosper in school because they are immature or otherwise unready for school.
- Some don't learn because we feed them with an empty spoon; they are not provided a rich curriculum and/or instructional practices that support high achievement.
- Others don't acquire the necessary knowledge and skills because of excessive absenteeism.
- Some students achieve at minimal levels because they make little effort to acquire knowledge—either because they do not view academic achievement as crucial or instrumental to their goals, there are no consequences to failure, or other things, such as money or physical prowess, are more highly esteemed.
- Still others are the victims of ill-conceived theories about children and how they learn that result in failure—and in practices on the part of teachers, administrators, parents and students, and the wider society, that sustain low achievement.
- Some students don't learn because they have no incentive (positive or negative) to engage them in the educative process.
- And still others fail because of a combination of the reasons identified above.

Policies to help underachieving students learn must address these underlying causes of failure. For some students, creating a negative incentive may be enough. Sending them a clear signal that learning counts, that failure to perform will result in retention may be sufficient to inspire this small number of students to devote attention to their studies. For a few others who have been absent, repeating the grade may make sense, since they were not exposed to the material in the first place. And for some children, particularly those with little or no access to high-quality early childhood programs, repeating the early grades may make sense. But for the vast majority of underachieving students, systemic change is required if success is to be achieved. Policies and practices have to be developed that address the problems of a lack of standards, undemanding curriculum, underprepared teachers, and administrative indifference to whether learning takes place. These policies must address what unique educational experiences and support services are necessary for children who fail or are at risk of failure. Absent attention to these issues, we are doomed to continue the ineffective pendulum swing between social promotion and retention.

19 percent of U.S. students are held back in the same grade each year. And in many large urban districts, upwards of 50 percent of the students who enter kindergarten are likely to be retained at least once before they graduate or drop out.

Now, a number of school districts—Chicago most prominent among them—have ended social promotion, and many more will follow suit. They are to be congratulated; ending social promotion is the right thing to do.

But just going to a policy of retention won't work. The fact is, neither social promotion *nor* retention is the answer—if the answer we're seeking is getting kids to achieve. In fact, throughout the 20th century, we've swung like a pendulum between these two policy approaches to student progression—and neither policy has done the job.

Now, if I had a gun to my head and had to choose between retaining or promoting a student who had not mastered the requisite material to be prepared for the next grade, I would choose retention over promotion.

But there *are* better choices. What are they? First, we need to take an "intensive-care" approach to students who are falling behind—*well before* we're at the point of promotion or retention decisions—by quickly identifying these students and concentrating every possible resource on getting them back on track quickly.

For example, Cincinnati's reform efforts include *immediate* intervention, such as providing students with

in-class, small-group instruction or multi-age grouping and also offering tutoring and summer school on top of that. For students in grades three, six and eight who still do not meet promotion standards but are at an age at which it is inappropriate to remain with younger students, there is something called "Plus Classes"—Three Plus, etc.—that have fewer students than regular classes do and an intensive, different approach to teaching students the specific knowledge and skills they haven't yet mastered.

In Albuquerque, the principal and parents must be notified early if retention is anticipated, and a special support program is designed for each child in danger of failing. Albuquerque also stipulates that no student can be retained without a specific intervention plan detailing the student's needs and how they will be met.

Second, we have to adopt rigorous standards that are clear to parents, teachers, and students. The stan-

To Order

Passing on Failure, the AFT's recently released 58-page report on school district promotion policies and practices, which also includes descriptions of programs designed to prevent failure before it happens, is available for \$5 from the AFT Order Department, 555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20001. Ask for Item 249.

Neither social promotion nor retention is the answer.

standards; they've been asking to be taken seriously. Listen to a teenager from wealthy Westchester County, N.Y., quoted in a Public Agenda report: "It's so dumb. You don't even have to try in my school. So I think if they did raise the standards, I probably would be a harder worker." And listen to a California teenager: "I think adults don't take us seriously enough. We're really smarter than they think. It's how far and how they push us ... I think a lot of kids—even those getting D's and stuff—can do a lot better." How right the kids are.

Third—and I want to say this loud and clear—we must place well-educated, well-trained teachers in every classroom, but especially in the classrooms of our neediest and most vulnerable children. And we have to make it a top priority, both in schools of education and in districts' professional development programs, to *insist* that all teachers of young children are fully proficient in teaching reading.

Teacher preparation is woefully inadequate in this crucial area, especially when it comes to preparing teachers who will be teaching our most at-risk youngsters. And many of our experienced teachers, too, need ongoing support in teaching phonology, phonetics, orthography, and other language skills—because we know a lot more now about teaching reading, but that research hasn't reached the classroom.

I use those fancy words like "phonology" deliberately. Because I want to remind everyone of the sophisticated knowledge and skill it takes to teach reading to a group of twenty-five or thirty wiggling, restless children, many of whom have never before been exposed to the printed page. They're depending on their teacher to unlock the mysteries of eye-to-brain coordination, of decoding and comprehending squiggles on a page that result in the joy and pleasure of reading. It is daunting.

And it's as dumb and cruel to expect someone—even a brilliant young AmeriCorps type—to go in and do that with at-risk kids without proper training as it would be to think one of us could take out another's appendix, armed only with good will, a workshop, and the advice from a few books.

THESE RECOMMENDATIONS—clear standards, special *timely* help for children who need it, and additional reading training for teachers—can be put in place immediately. In some instances, we'll see immediate results; in others, results won't be evident for a couple of years, but progress will be evident immediately, not only in terms of students—as well as teachers—getting the help they need, but in the strong signal that will be sent to parents and the public that school districts will be deploying every available resource to ensuring that all kids, and not just our more advantaged kids, will read and generally achieve well by the time they leave third grade and that all students, and not just our more advantaged students, will graduate from high school with the requisite skills to go to college or get a decent job.

But perhaps our most significant recommendation—the one that will ultimately make the biggest difference—is not something we in school districts can do tomorrow—unless we get state and federal help. And that is to make available high-quality pre-school and



dards should be accompanied by grade-by-grade curricula and assessments that make it possible for teachers to know *in time* when children are in trouble so they can seek *timely* intervention.

Corpus Christi is farthest along with this, combining clear and rigorous standards with an end to social promotion and an emphasis on intervention. Results of the first two years are encouraging: Scores on state reading, writing, and math tests are up significantly in all grades—which proves our youngsters *can* do what's required of them.

In fact, the students would have told us this. In their own way, they've been asking adults to take a stand on

Explicit Standards Give Definition to 'Earned' Promotion

CLEAR ACADEMIC standards are essential to higher achievement and success for all. As Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat said: "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." Without explicit grade-by-grade standards for students, anything goes, and anything is accepted—and sometimes even mediocre or poor work is rewarded as excellent.

Commonly shared grade-by-grade standards for students are essential. These standards

- support academic rigor and ensure fairness by defining the expectations for success for all students;

- eliminate the need for every teacher to set his or her own standards for grading and promotion decisions, or for requesting special services for students who are falling behind;

- give teachers the authority to demand that students work hard, without the risk of appearing arbitrary or mean;

- make academic expectations public and, therefore, accessible to students, parents, and the community;

- furnish the basis for professional development for teachers as they come to consensus about what evidence of student learning is appropriate, how to spot problems in achieving the standards, and what strategies enhance student progress toward meeting the standards; and, most important

- provide the basis for monitoring and managing student learning and making decisions about promotion, retention, and the need for additional educational services.

kindergarten programs for all children—and if not for all children, then definitely, urgently, immediately, for our neediest children.

Let me point to the example of France, which not only has high student achievement but also the smallest gaps in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged youngsters. A major reason for that is a system of preschools that was originally started for the children of working mothers and immigrant families to make up for the children's lack of academic readiness. And because France did not treat these preschools as a poverty program and gave these children the best, the preschool programs proved to be so effective that middle-class, full-time mothers are sending their kids, and the demand has made the pre-schools practically universal.

Look at what we're suggesting: A good preschool *educational* experience; special help like tutoring and extended day and extended year when children are falling behind; high standards, a challenging curriculum, and tests that measure what's supposed to be

taught; qualified, well-prepared teachers This all exists in schools across America. But not in all schools where we're working to educate our neediest youngsters. Not in all of our large urban districts. Far too few of them, relative to the need.

So the big question is, can we make it happen there? I believe we can. I know that in many places we are. We see achievement getting better; we see standards being raised; we see investment being made and scarce resources being spent more wisely. But we have to step it up. Our urban kids face terrible problems, and they need extra help. Instead, they get less. And then either they or their teachers, or both, are blamed for failure.

Too many adults in our society have given up on our poorest youngsters. Instead of raising hell and making sure poor kids get the common-sense things they need, the things middle-class kids in middle-class schools take for granted, we get political leaders and opinion makers calling for vouchers and privatization, as if those radical schemes will provide what every other advanced civilized nation in the world provides for *all* its kids: safe, orderly, well-supplied schools with high standards and highly educated, well-trained teachers.

Many of you are aware that, within the past few weeks, two polls came out showing growing public support for vouchers. They got a lot of press, and they deserved to. But what didn't get any press is something else in those polls, something that is far more significant. And that is that parents and the public want first and foremost for their public schools to be fixed. They believe that better discipline and more rigorous academic standards that are faithfully adhered to would be a far more effective reform than vouchers. And they are correct. To the extent that support for vouchers has grown, it is because of frustration with the pace of getting better discipline and higher standards in our schools, particularly in our poorest schools. Too many of our leaders, too many of the people in charge of our schools, still aren't taking the public's message seriously enough.

Friends, our society needs a lot of things. Those who want to eliminate all government regulation or a government role in education should be reminded of what "government" means in a democracy. It means us. It means "the people." It means the public. And if that is too abstract, let them ponder the 25 million pounds of meat with the E.coli bacteria that the "government" just had to have recalled.

We survived that. We would not survive the demise of a public education system. And we can't survive unless we have the best public school system in the world—including and especially for our toughest, roughest, neediest students, who are also, underneath it all, many of our sweetest, greatest kids.

I have seen it happen. I know it can be done.

There is nothing wrong with our kids that adults can't cure. And there is nothing wrong with our schools that we can't fix. We must—and can—prevent failure before it occurs. We must—and can—intervene swiftly and effectively if it does. And stopping the empty, useless cycle of social promotion and retention has to be high up on our agenda. □