



A Union of Professionals

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Thank you. Together with our Secretary-Treasurer Toni Cortese and our Executive Vice President Lorretta Johnson, I want to welcome you to the American Federation of Teachers' QuEST conference. You may know that I just came from the White House and, as a result, we had to change the order of things for this afternoon. And you all just took it in stride. That's one of the qualities I love about teachers—you just roll with things. As explanations go, I think ours is a pretty good one. A number of national union presidents had requested a meeting with President Obama to discuss crucial issues for our members, issues like healthcare and workers' right to a union.

It was a productive meeting. I'll be talking in a few minutes about the importance of collaboration and union engagement, and so once again I thank you for your collaboration in enabling this union to engage today with the president of the United States on behalf of our members.

I want to thank Chairman Vincent Gray for being here earlier, and for his strong support of the District of Columbia public schools. And we are honored that Josh Williams, the head of the Metropolitan Washington Labor Council, is with us. And of course, I want to recognize our brothers and sisters from the Washington Teachers' Union—President George Parker, and all of the WTU officers, executive board leaders and members who are here. They have been in the fight of their lives. Stand up so we can let you know that we are with you!

For more than three decades, QuEST has brought together AFT members and the broader education community—superintendents, school board members, policy experts, civil rights and advocacy groups, and representatives from business, higher education and the social services.

To all of you—and to your counterparts throughout this country—our message is clear: We want to work together with you—in an atmosphere of shared responsibility, mutual respect, and genuine partnership—to improve all our schools in all our communities for all our children.

A special word to all the teachers in this room, who have taken time from your families to travel to this conference here in Washington during this hot and rainy summer: Thank you for being here—it simply epitomizes your commitment to your students and your profession.

Whenever you entered this profession—whether it was in the decade of disco or the decade of derivatives—you answered a higher calling than the siren song of looking out for No. 1. During these last 10 years of greed and grab, you weren't part of the irresponsibility on Wall Street or in Washington. You had nothing to do with the hedge funds, the Ponzi schemes, and all the other schemes and scams that wrecked our economy, trashed our Constitution, and left so many Americans anxious, angry and disillusioned.

It's all made us hit a national "pause" button. It's time to start looking at our personal as well as our national finances, to think about whether what we do in life should be about short-term gains or long-term goals. Responsibility is gaining currency again. But let's face it: America's teachers were responsible before responsibility was cool.

Yes, teachers are responsible people. But we can't shoulder that responsibility alone. Public education must be a shared responsibility for parents, teachers, school administrators, the business community, and every citizen and taxpayer—all of us working together for the greater good.

Public education is a uniquely American idea and an audaciously American experiment. The champions of our democracy believe that education should not be provided solely to wealthy white males. Champions of democracy in every era understood—and understand—that power lies with the people to take the idea of democratic rule and make it real. Over the years, America has broadened our democracy, built our economy, and brought waves of immigrants into the mainstream—and leadership—of our society. Public schools have made that possible, and public school teachers have provided both more education and a better education to an ever-widening circle of our citizens.

From the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, half a century ago, that overturned the legal structures of segregation, to lesser-known victories for people with mental and physical disabilities, for girls and young women and the foreign-born, the expansion of American democracy can be measured by the expansion of educational opportunity through our public schools.

With our country confronting complex questions from financial meltdown and global warming, to soaring healthcare costs and declining retirement security, we need an informed citizenry to debate and decide our future. The issue is not simply one of access to education, it is access to a rich and rigorous education for all. Our increasingly complex and interconnected world dictates that we ask more of our public education system and those employed in it, because the world asks so much more of us.

The American people understand the power of education, and they appreciate the promise of PUBLIC education, because for them public schools are not an abstraction. They entrust their children to public schools every day—not just some children, but 90 percent of all our young people. Their fight is our fight—to preserve and improve our public schools, to build deeper, richer curriculum and programs that will open windows of possibility for the minds that will guide all of our futures.

Yet, with the budget crisis consuming our states, there is a grave danger that this country will step back and disinvest in public education—even though education is the most important investment that we give to each generation.

That is why the theme of this conference—"Investing in Our Future"—couldn't be more timely.

For us in the AFT, investing in education means supporting what we do best: Giving voice to teachers' aspirations. Generating the ideas, born of our experience in the classroom, to transform teaching and learning. And advocating, agitating and educating to put those ideas into practice.

Thanks to you, the AFT has succeeded in advancing those ideas and ideals over the past year.

With thousands of AFT members throughout this country volunteering in the campaign, we helped elect a new president, Barack Obama, who understands the direct connection between education and the economy.

With AFT members spreading the word in their communities, we helped elect a U.S. House and Senate with stronger majorities, and a number of governors who support public schools, public services and an economy that works for working people.

And we didn't stop advocating, agitating and educating after the election—because we couldn't afford to. Instead, we refocused our energy on the economy. AFT members all across the country, including many of you in this room, wrote, called and visited your senators and representatives, and urged them to enact a stimulus plan that would avert catastrophic cutbacks in our public schools.

And, we prevailed. In the face of state budget gaps totaling almost \$350 billion in cuts to education nationwide, we helped secure more than \$100 billion in the economic stimulus program, plus additional funding in the new federal budget, thereby averting many cutbacks and layoffs, preserving proven programs, and enabling investment in innovations in our schools. I know that many of us still are struggling, but I shudder to think what the situation would be like without the stimulus. We may never know how truly dire the outcome would have been.

Now, let me be clear: Even with the stimulus, we still need to fight against cutbacks, against layoffs and against threats to shortchange our kids.

But we can take pride and purpose in the fact that we have a President who believes that education is a top priority and who is working in tandem with majorities in both Houses of Congress.

Despite all of this, there is no doubt we will have our disappointments and disagreements with some of the very people whom we helped elect. But we must not forget: If we had not worked so hard to elect President Obama and a Congress we could work with, there would be no education stimulus.

But the stimulus is not just about changing our schools' financial outlook. It has the potential to be the catalyst that fundamentally changes public education. The question is—how will *we* change public education?

Think about it.

Say you had hair your whole life—going bald would be a change. Now that may be a great look for Mr. Clean, but suffice it to say.... We know that what we want is not just **any** kind of change: We want improvement, we want growth, we want sustainability, we want commitment, and we need real collaboration to make this work for our students.

Knowing as we do that even the closest of families and the best of friends sometimes disagree, how are we going to manage the inevitable disagreements, while building on our basic agreements?

You may have heard that the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, likes to play a little basketball. You may also have heard that he plays a pretty good game, and in pretty good company. I mean no

disrespect to his love of basketball, but I grew up loving football. I still do. How can you not love it? So many of life's lessons are right there.

1. You have to be on the field to play the game.
2. You have to play offense—and defense.
3. You have to be able to withstand—and sometimes give—some hard knocks. And
4. If you're not moving the ball up field, you're being pushed backward.

Now you may not all be football fanatics like I am, but you are AFT members so by definition you're smart. You know where I'm going.

Teachers are on the field—24/7/365.

And hard knocks—well, those come in many forms. From witnessing the hardships so many of our kids go through; to enduring demands to do more, but with less; to hearing the seemingly endless, and often baseless, criticisms from pundits and policymakers.

But we're still standing—because we can take it and our job is too important to not stand up.

With our position—and with this administration—we're on the field. Our choice, then, is simple: Are we going to be the ones moving the ball forward or the ones being pushed backward?

We could just fold ourselves into a defensive crouch and spend every waking hour fighting the so-called reforms that we believe are ill-considered, poorly crafted and incompetently executed.

But if we take such a stance, will it really make things better? How is that going to help the kids who most need the boost that a high-quality education will provide them? How is it going to help teachers in terms of their professional aspirations, their economic security, or their capacity to withstand the onslaught of attacks that we will endure?

Luckily, we can make another choice. We can be the engine of real change in education, providing the ideas, the guidance and the people who can get the job done. We can shape the debate by informing the debate, understanding that we may find ourselves in difficult conversations about controversial issues.

It won't be easy. No doubt at times it will be uncomfortable. But it's the right thing to do, and it's the right thing for our union to do.

When we say “with us, not to us,” it means we have to be on the field, and we have to be engaged.

During his campaign, *candidate* Obama made very clear his commitment to the public schools. *President* Obama's commitment is just as clear. And he has made it equally clear that he wants his term in office to be a transformative moment for the public schools.

Throughout the campaign, candidate Obama said that he would push the envelope in education, even in areas that raised our eyebrows such as:

- using public charter schools as part of his strategy to transform struggling public schools;
- adopting pay-for-performance plans to reward and differentiate among teachers; and
- offering financial incentives as a means of attracting and retaining teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects.

But that's not all. He also said that these reforms must be done *with* teachers—not *to* teachers. He said that teachers unions would have a seat at the table and a say in decision-making. In short, he said he wants to work with us—not work us over.

After I conclude, we will have a town hall meeting with Secretary Duncan. He too wants to work with us—to listen to frontline educators, and to hear our ideas and our concerns. Because a big part of enacting changes in public education with us, not to us, is listening to and responding to us.

We're taking President Obama and Secretary Duncan at their word. That's what those buttons mean that you're wearing—"with us, not to us." When we work collaboratively, we can build the school and larger communities that envelop our children, giving them the time, attention and care they need—and the education that prepares them for today's and tomorrow's worlds. And when we say "with us, not to us," we're not talking just to the folks here in Washington who create the education policy. We're talking to governors; to mayors; to superintendents and to principals; to community activists and to parents; and to all the people who select the curriculum and assessments, negotiate pay schedules, apply for federal grants, bring in or shut out communities and parents, develop teacher support and evaluation systems, dictate class sizes, develop after-school or other programs, and make a thousand other decisions that affect teaching and learning. We say to them, do these things "WITH US, NOT TO US."

And what do we bring to the table and—most importantly—to our students? We bring you—your real world classroom experience, your enthusiasm and caring, and your commitment. You know: Trees grow from the ground up. So if we want to figure out how to improve our schools, let's talk to the people on the ground, in the trenches—the teachers in the classroom.

But we also have to bring out own ideas to the table.

That is what the AFT Innovation Fund is all about—advancing the aspirations and expertise of America's educators. Earlier this year, the AFT launched the Innovation Fund with the goal of supporting bottom-up, union-generated proposals that address pressing educational issues, take risks and expand our knowledge about how to dramatically improve our schools. We encouraged our locals to take up the challenge and propose bold, game-changing innovations. The response has been both gratifying and overwhelming, with more than 100 local unions applying for Innovation Fund grants, from Alabama to Alaska.

We received applications that proposed alternative compensation plans; innovative pathways into the profession; new teacher evaluation systems; ground-breaking school designs; and collaborative partnerships with parents and community groups to address out-of-school learning factors. So many

of you worked so hard to put forth your ideas. While only a portion of the proposals could be funded, every local that applied is a winner.

I want to ask all of the leaders and team members who applied for Innovation Fund grants to stand and take a bow. Congratulations on your courage and your willingness to stir things up in your union and in your schools!

But innovation and engagement are not new to us. Last November, I gave a speech at the National Press Club to make clear that the AFT knows we can't make and sustain change alone. As I said then: Every idea is on the table—except for private school vouchers that drain resources from the public schools—as long as the idea is good for kids and fair to teachers.

In the spirit of shared responsibility and the climate of a new era in Washington, I have tried to find common ground on issues that often have been battlegrounds:

- adopting common academic standards and securing the tools, time and other conditions teachers and students need;
- negotiating differential salaries that some would call “merit pay”;
- incentivizing the best teachers to teach in schools with the greatest challenges; and
- improving or removing those who aren't cutting it as teachers.

We never consider these in a vacuum, or as a panacea—we always look at each one through the lens of whether the idea or practice or implementation is good for kids and fair to teachers.

As those of you who have attended previous QuEST conferences well know, this is what the AFT does. We tackle the toughest issues and offer solutions that improve teaching and learning. Common academic standards, new approaches to early childhood learning, peer assistance and review, turning around the lowest performing schools and creating schools that break the mold—some of the most thoughtful approaches to public education have been championed by our union.

Sadly, however, for too long the debate about education has been polarized between policymakers and frontline educators; between those who believe teachers are to blame for our schools' shortcomings and those who see teachers as the key to turning struggling schools around; and between those who believe that the schools alone can improve the lives of kids from low-income communities and those who emphasize the importance of addressing the full range of socioeconomic conditions.

We in the AFT can bridge these divides because, as union educators, we serve two indispensable and interrelated functions: (1) We represent teachers' and other educators' right to decent pay, secure jobs, stable benefits and simple justice on the jobs; and (2) we give voice to teachers' most profound aspirations as professionals—to provide the best possible education for children who need a smart start on life's journey.

We can bridge these divides because our feet are planted in two essential institutions. Our public schools, which at their best, are the great equalizer for young people. And our union movement, which at its best, is the great equalizer for working people.

As I have traveled this country, I have seen firsthand how teachers unions can partner with school administrators and the entire community to improve our schools. Often this involves an idea that we have championed—an idea that gives life to the American ideal of public education—making the school the center of the community, with a spectrum of services that benefit children and their families.

In the ABC Unified School District, a small urban school district not far from Los Angeles, the ABC Federation of Teachers and its superintendent have turned a struggling district into one with greatly improving quality. They now have solid, ongoing professional support where it never existed before, and teachers and administrators work together on behalf of their students. And what was the glue that pulled together all the high-quality instructional improvements? Collaboration—with a capital C. I was there recently, and what a pleasure—the superintendent and the union president spoke with one voice. Let's use their line: They solve problems, not win arguments. And who benefits from that? You got it—their students. I know there's a labor-management team here from ABC—stand up!

In Baltimore, a place that often is assailed by policymakers and pundits, not to mention “The Wire,” recent assessments show their students doing better in reading and math than ever before. The greatest gains have been among English language learners, African-Americans, and special education and low-income students. Those students posted double-digit gains, surpassing districtwide improvements. And I'll share a secret with you: Test scores scheduled to be released next week show that students in every grade in Baltimore City advanced in reading and math. First- and second-grade students exceed or match the national average for math and reading scores. And for high schoolers, graduation rates are at a record high, dropout rates are at an all-time low, and the High School Assessment scores are also higher than ever. Baltimore is in the house—stand up!

Despite its very real, significant financial issues, Detroit is poised for an educational renaissance with new district and union leadership. Administrators Robert Bobb and Barbara Byrd-Bennett are here with local union presidents Keith Johnson, Ruby Newbold and state federation president David Hecker. They jointly hosted a districtwide professional development day in May, at which I had the pleasure of speaking, with 7,000 members, all ready to roll up their sleeves.

Detroit—I know you're here—stand up!

In Toledo recently, I saw a shining example of what we have always known: Good teachers are not born—they are nurtured and supported. Through the highly regarded teacher evaluation system—known as peer assistance and review—that the union developed, experienced teachers coach, support and evaluate their colleagues. They have helped many teachers—both new and struggling—identify and address their weaknesses, and become effective. They have also counseled out of the profession some teachers who, even after receiving help, couldn't measure up. This initiative—another collaborative venture agreed to through contract negotiations—put the union in the forefront of improving teacher quality and has been adopted by many other locals. How about a shout-out for Toledo? And for all the other districts doing peer assistance and review—like Hamburg, N.Y., and Anderson, Ind.

And why have they done it? Because they care about the kids and want to make sure that struggling teachers get better or get out. Because they believe in their colleagues, and invest their time, their talent, and their intellectual and emotional energy in helping them improve their work. And because

they care about their profession and are willing to counsel out, in a fair, humane way, those who do not meet their high standards of competence and commitment.

And when Secretary Duncan visits our cities, we'd like to hear him talk about the good things going on in our schools, like the examples I've just touched upon. Maybe we can take him on some field trips....

So in places like Toledo, they have elevated teacher evaluation to new heights. Sadly, however, for too long and in too many places, teacher evaluation has ranged from hollow to harmful. For most teachers, the process of evaluation is a ritual in which a principal spends 15 minutes in their classroom once a year checking off a grocery list of minimum competencies. This process does not improve teaching nor does it improve learning.

Of course, teacher evaluation should include how well a teacher is doing, and that has to include how well we deliver a lesson and how it is received and learned. Student learning has an appropriate place in teacher evaluation. The real question is: How do you measure that in a fair and meaningful way? One principal observation a year is not the way, and neither are scores from one test. And how do we make sure the evaluation system also includes the concept of shared responsibility—meaning that the district also is doing its job and not simply throwing the keys to the teacher and saying: “You do it.”

I've appointed a teacher evaluation committee, which is working hard to come up with meaningful ways to evaluate and support teachers. We're incorporating our experiences in Toledo, the ABC school district and elsewhere, where teachers and their union share in the responsibility and get good results. Stay tuned—the committee's work is well under way.

Now, I want to take a few minutes to talk about charter schools.

And it will not be the last time you hear me talk about them, because charter schools are now a part of the education landscape. Like any public school—and no one should ever forget that charter schools are public schools—successful charter schools should be applauded and should share their lessons; troubled charter schools that fail their students should be held accountable and closed; and charter school teachers should be supported and given the right to union membership and voice.

Charter schools and other public schools should not be pitted against each other. Education is not a game where we can afford winners and losers. Superintendents, school boards and elected leaders have a responsibility to help all public schools succeed, and should not be allowed to walk away from that responsibility by turning entire public school systems into charter schools. As a nation, our commitment must be to educate all students, not only those who submit an application or who are selected by lottery.

All of us have an absolute obligation to ensure that the needs of all our public schools and of the children who attend them are not abandoned in the unchecked proliferation of charter schools. And I say that as a labor leader who runs two charter schools, who just signed an agreement to represent

the teachers in a third, and who represents educators in 80 charter schools, many of whom are here today.

Public charter schools can inspire new and creative approaches to instruction and can be a source for innovation in both education and labor relations. But, just like other public schools, charter schools must meet the same standards for academic performance and must ensure access for all students, regardless of test scores, language proficiency or special needs. Because these are public, taxpayer-funded schools, parents and citizens have the right to demand appropriate oversight and regulation. When these fundamental qualities are met, charter schools become “public” schools in the broadest sense.

In that spirit, I want to extend a special welcome to a remarkable group of educators who are part of our AFT family—more than 40 union members working in charter schools from 10 states—California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New York and Pennsylvania.

Just this year, charter educators in Los Angeles, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and New York City joined the AFT in order to win a voice for teachers and staff in their schools.

And just last month, in New York City, our union signed a contract with Green Dot that is a model for connecting teacher professionalism and student achievement. And Green Dot is a model for something else—labor relations. By design and by choice, Green Dot has union contracts for 100 percent of the teachers in the charter schools it operates. These contracts maintain due process and contain strong provisions regarding class size and teacher voice.

Let’s have our charter school teachers stand up and be recognized!

Speaking of NYC, many of you know that, as of Aug. 1, the local union there, my home local, will have a new president so I can devote 24/7/365 to the AFT.

So, to our broader community—whether you are parents, policymakers or principals, or work in public schools or public charter schools, we have the same request: When it comes to making the changes that will make our schools better, do it with us—not to us. When education reform is done to teachers and their unions, it is doomed to fail. But when education reform is done with teachers, it is destined to succeed.

And because everyone loves “data,” we’re figuring out how to measure whether reforms are being done with us or to us. I call it the collaboration meter—I think you can probably see it on the screens. Because we know that multiple measures give a more realistic picture than a single test, we have a series of questions that determine if the meter moves from kumbaya hot to I-never-want-to-speak-to-you-again cold.

So here are some questions for the people who run our school systems and our schools:

Are you asking teachers in their unions: What do you need, in terms of resources and support, to improve teaching and learning? Yes? [Note: meter goes one way]. Or no?

Are you working with teachers to develop plans to engage parents and the community in the life of the school? Yes? Or no?

Are you working with your teachers and their union to develop model instructional programs? Yes? Or no?

Are you working with your teachers and their union to create and conduct job-embedded professional development programs? Yes? Or no?

Are you working with your teachers on standards and how to help students reach them? Yes? Or no?

If you are developing a proposal for Secretary Duncan's Race to the Top program—and we hope that you are—are you consulting with your teachers and their union? Yes? Or no?

In short, do you see your teachers as indispensable partners, not immovable obstacles to positive change? Yes? Or no?

If your district's answers are "yes," then you are doing the real work of school improvement with us, not to us—and you are on the road to success for our students, our schools and our common future.

While our course has not always been easy, our compass has always been pointed in the right direction—toward true equality for all, toward civil and human rights here and abroad, toward real worker rights so that one's labor is respected, and toward placing the American dream within the reach of ALL our children.

We are the ones who won collective bargaining community by community, contract by contract.

We are the ones who organized paraprofessionals and school-related personnel, battling their poverty wages and building their career ladders.

And we are also the ones who took the field, and chose to engage, not ignore, the movement for education reform, presenting a positive agenda of our own. As Al Shanker used to say, "You can't beat something with nothing."

I hope you're as outraged as I am when our critics say that unions are part of the problem, not the solution; that we are only in it for ourselves; that we represent adults against kids; and that we are a selfish special interest set against the public interest.

We won't let them take away our jobs. We won't let them cut our pay. We won't let them plunder our pensions. And I will be damned if I let them define who we are.

Because nobody—nobody—goes into teaching to feather his or her own nest. And this union, which proudly works on its members' behalf, has always been about something bigger. That is why we fight—24/7/365—for the social and economic conditions that will help our students do better in school.

And teachers are the first ones to say that there is no excuse for failing schools and teachers who can't teach.

But there is also no excuse for a society where 13 million kids are growing up without health insurance, regular medical checkups and decent dental care. And there is no excuse for the fact that 55 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the resources and the quality of our nation's public schools for the haves and have-nots are still vastly unequal. And there also is no excuse for doing things to us, rather than working with us.

For all the terrible problems we face, this is a watershed moment in America. We can expand what we mean by high-quality public education, and we can extend those opportunities to all our young people. And as the recognition of the centrality of education to our economy and our democracy grows stronger, so will teachers' ability to win the resources, the respect and the responsibility we need to do our jobs. But we have to stay on the field, and play offense as well as defense.

If we keep faith with those who came before us and fight for those who depend on us, then we will be what AFT members have always been—the masters of our own destiny—and our students and our schools will be better for it.

Thank you all for everything you are doing, for coming here this week, and for the honor of being one of you—a proud union teacher.