
SPECIAL ORDERS OF BUSINESS

EDUCATION REFORM

I. Education Today: What We Face

American public education is now experiencing the kind of attention this nation has not given it since the days of Sputnik in the late '50s and the era of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the mid '60s. It is a time of both tremendous opportunity and potential danger. During this historic period, there are two possible agendas for education's consideration. One includes tuition tax credits for private schools, to the certain detriment of the public school system. The other represents the possibility of a great public education renewal and revival. The choices we make now may decide for years to come whether or not public education will have the human resources, both to survive, and to provide for the nation at large.

Education must not experience the disasters we are now witnessing in other fields. Those worn-out bridges we have been warned about in recent years are now falling down. Just as this nation has neglected its roads, bridges, railroads and basic industries like auto and steel, so too could it continue to passively watch the erosion of its human resources. Education's traditional pools of talent are now drying up. The older professionals who emerged from the Depression years are retiring. The talented women and minorities to whom teaching was one of the few available careers now go elsewhere.

Repairing our national infrastructure will take years of commitment and substantial resources. Insuring quality education will also demand time and money. Neither are passing fads. Without serious attention both sets of problems will only become worse.

The American Federation of Teachers was among the first to argue that developing human capital takes intelligent investment. Before us now, in response to this argument, are a series of critical but constructive reports, analyzing public education's contemporary problems and offering many worthy, and some debatable, solutions. The most important of these are well known by now: "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education; "Action for Excellence," produced by the Education Commission of the States' Task Force on Economic Growth; and the "Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal/Elementary and Secondary Education Policy." From these can arise both discussion and action on sound education reform.

We believe that these reports can become a serious part of our national agenda only if those who act on them at every level recognize that change and improvement cost money. Neither Ronald Reagan nor any local school board should think we will be fooled into believing that changes can be made without added resources.

We have also argued strenuously that tuition tax credits, whether they be instituted federally, at the state level or locally, offer a recipe for dismantling public education. It is impossible to underestimate the ammunition the recent Supreme Court decision upholding Minnesota's tuition tax deduction plan gives to the advocates of tuition tax credits. Bolstered with renewed energy, the push for tuition tax credits can divert our attention away from constructive reform. Besides being dangerous, it can sap our energy and make us defensive. The time is upon us when virtually every policy move we make in education should be measured in terms of its

potential impact in the war over tuition tax credits.

In these circumstances, the American Federation of Teachers will make a clear choice. There is much in the new reports and the moves for reform that we laud and commend. We will choose constructive engagement with all who support the public education system, critical though they may be of teachers, over any isolated, rigid position that could have the effect of courting tuition tax credits. Besides, we think the public schools need changing anyway. The time to act is now if we are to have the necessary talent to run the schools of tomorrow. Our agenda will be to:

- upgrade the public education program, and in so doing enlist broad public support for the schools;
- find ways to recruit and keep a quality teaching force;
- prevent the enactment of tuition tax credit plans at all levels—federal, state and local.

II. Quality Education and Quality Teaching— A New Agenda

The American Federation of Teachers welcomes the discussion now under way among leading figures in education, business, labor and government over the need to tighten standards of excellence in the public schools. We repeat here, as we have said elsewhere, our stance in favor of:

- stricter high school graduation requirements in academic subjects including math, science, English, history, and foreign languages, though not at the expense of other essentials like music, art, and vocational education;
- the use of fair and objective student testing to insure a continuing relationship between school and grade completion and educational content;
- increased homework assignments;
- tougher requirements for student discipline;
- transfer of students who repeatedly prevent others from learning to alternative settings until such time as they are able to return to a regular classroom setting;
- curriculum review and renewal to insure use of the best materials and updated information, especially in areas like science, math, and computer education.

Since our special responsibility is to insure the future of quality teaching, we are particularly concerned that today's education reform movement not come up with faulty solutions and misguided emphasis. We are firm in our view that only competent teachers should be in the classrooms of this nation's schools. We believe that excellence should be rewarded. We are distressed that the teaching profession is proving to be less and less attractive to high quality potential recruits and that it is losing some of its best and brightest to more lucrative private sector jobs. We also recognize that whatever solutions are offered to address this problem could significantly transform our schools. This is not a simple problem that can be patched over with superficial answers.

The American Federation of Teachers welcomes the opportunity to discuss this problem openly.

While we have no final judgments, we have views and concerns. We believe that some options should take priority over others. Incentive pay or discretionary merit pay is not the first and best way to insure teacher quality. Unfortunately, the public and the media are giving it more attention than it deserves. In fact, it is our fear that a preoccupation with this single idea will divert attention away from a set of proposals much more likely to solve the problem. In our view a real solution would include:

- An insistence on beginning teacher tests which will set a high standard for entry level teacher recruits. Minimum competency is not enough. All beginning teachers should be tested and required to meet a standard which represents at least the average of all college graduates.
- Higher teacher certification requirements that specifically include greater emphasis on subject matter competence and less emphasis on methods courses.

- Radical increases in beginning teacher pay. Unless teachers can start teaching with salaries equivalent to those of other college graduates, we will stand no chance of attracting good candidates. This will mean entry salaries at least \$6,000 to \$8,000 higher than the current ones.

- Salary amounts and patterns that encourage good teachers to stay in the profession. Salary schedules of 10 to 12 very small steps, spread out over a decade or more in years, can hardly serve this purpose. Keeping good teachers is more likely with adequate salary schedules of 3 to 5 years at most.

- The need to maintain teacher excitement and intellectual stimulation. Teachers want to teach courses that are challenging to students who are interested. At least part of the attention given to curriculum should also focus on how all teachers can have schedules, courses, retraining and enrichment opportunities that act as incentives for them to continue in the profession.

- Assurance that whatever measures schools take to improve discipline and minimize disruption—not turn teachers into policemen. Discipline codes and school organization patterns should not burden teachers with responsibilities that sap their energies and divert their attention away from their proper teaching role.

- Expanded opportunities for teachers to help new teachers, to implement staff development plans and to create patterns of collegiality that insure ongoing professional renewal. This will undoubtedly cause major revision of the current authority structure in schools and considerably alter the traditional role of the principal. We favor change that would further separate administrative functions from educational leadership.

- Implementation of fair and practical methods for removing incompetent teachers from the profession. These must involve due process and be based on evaluation criteria which teachers regard as objective and reasonable.

III. New Compensation Proposals

While we put our faith in reform measures like

those cited above, we cannot ignore the current misguided preoccupation with the idea that incentive pay or discretionary merit pay is the most important cure for what ails the teaching profession. We do not accept this view. There is little evidence to support it. We recognize that the public wants a response on this issue, and so we will offer one. But, we hope thinking about it will not turn business, policy-makers and educators away from more fundamental and sound solutions.

Traditionally such pay plans have been plagued with serious flaws. The history of such efforts is riddled with failure owing to their inherent subjectivity, staff morale problems and the cumbersome nature of their administration. Few such plans reward more than a few teachers. Most keep the vast majority of teacher salaries low. All of this has been well documented.

But this said, we do think that some of the more recent proposals allowing the advancement of large numbers of teachers to "master teacher" type career roles involving extra pay warrant consideration. Therefore, while merit pay is not AFT policy, under certain circumstances state federations and locals may feel the need to negotiate such plans. In such circumstances they should meet the following criteria:

- Any new compensation plan should have as a fundamental a higher base pay for all teachers.

- Evaluation cannot be left solely to principals and supervisors who have traditionally made subjective judgments about teacher competence based more on favoritism and patronage than merit. New evaluation patterns should be negotiated and must offer protections against subjectivity and local school politics.

- Those who do not receive extra pay should suffer no loss of tenure, job security or status.

- Decisions to grant additional pay must be subject to appeal and review procedures that are fair and objective.

- Any financial rewards offered must be part of a plan committed to improving the conditions and pay of teachers who function in classrooms, and not simply result in adding new layers of administration.

- The possibility of applying for and receiving additional pay above a basic salary should be open to all applicants voluntarily. It should also be actually awarded to substantial proportions of the teaching force.

- Once additional compensation is made it should not be subject to diminution.

- Evaluation criteria should reflect the complexity of all the factors contributing to teacher and student success. Any simplistic efforts to measure teacher success using student achievement scores should be opposed.

- Even if the above criteria are met, conditions vary locally and in different states. Therefore, such plans should not be imposed on teachers and should not be adopted unless they are acceptable to teachers through collective bargaining or other appropriate actions.

IV. The Unfinished Agenda

We caution all educators and policy-makers that in the drive to raise standards, insist on excellence and crack down on laxness and discipline, we not neglect those difficult children who are prone to failure. For almost twenty years, our public schools have concerned themselves with reaching the underserved and the disadvantaged. Any new emphasis on quality must continue with this goal. If raising standards creates problems for some, then they must get special help. No new-found concentration on stringency and performance should cause an increase in dropping out, a decline in high school graduation or the creation of schools that do not deliver for every child. Part of the adjustment we may have to make must include the strengthening of special programs for children with special needs.

This kind of concern was behind nearly two decades of growth in federal education dollars for the poor, the handicapped and the non-English speaking. Those dollars, and the dollars added to them at the state and local levels, have produced profoundly successful results. Research has documented these results over and over again. No argument for quality and excellence can ignore this experience. Nor should any new emphasis replace a continuing effort to serve these groups.

There can be no conflict between the goals of equal educational opportunity and educational excellence. Achieving both will cost money. We accept no cheap denials of the fact that in education dollars and standards must go hand in hand, whether for the tested programs we know will work, or for the new ones we are about to try.

V. An Action Plan

Our dialogue has already begun on these matters with the education, media, government and business worlds. In order to continue it at an even higher level and in even greater intensity we plan to initiate a series of internal discussions among our own leaders and members on the future details of our further response. We also intend to formalize our consultations with leaders in the broader society who are concerned with these issues. To begin its program the American Federation of Teachers announces its intention to:

- Invite a number of notable leaders from all walks of life to serve on a special AFT Advisory Commission on Educational Quality. This group will be asked to consult with us regularly on the best ways of implementing education reform.

- Initiate a series of regional conferences beginning this fall to discuss reform issues and to recommend methods for carrying out change.

- Continue our efforts to defeat tuition tax credits by discussing their implications for public education and by opposing the election of any public official who supports them.

These steps represent only a beginning. We intend to approach the opportunity before us as one that will require enduring creativity and fortitude. We also believe that without this kind of effort the

public schools that made this country great face possible demise. It is with this in mind that we choose to rethink our ways of defending them, and through that process, hope to make them better.
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