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TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM

Keynote Speech by

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"PROFESSIONALIZATION: THE DADE COUNTY STORY"

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I want to start by thanking Pat Tornillo for inviting me. First, because sleet, snow, and freezing rain was the forecast in New York. And second, because it really is an honor to address my colleagues here in Dade County. You represent the best -- the best in teacher unionism, the best in professionalism, and the best in leadership for education reform.

Pat Tornillo and Joe Fernandez, your dynamic superintendent, are a model for the entire nation. They provide the clearest example of how a superintendent and teacher union leader can work together to make real, positive educational change.

It's important for you to know -- and I am here to tell you -- that those of us who closely watch the education reform movement are cheering you on. We

know that in most places the reform movement has produced little more than rhetoric and that even here you're still facing many of the same nitty-gritty problems we all have.

Although in New York we sometimes go a bit far. As I left the city yesterday, for example, I got a quick look at a report of a study our Board of Education had done of its computer division, which is working on solving the problem of the paperwork burying our schools. The Division of Computer Information Services, as it's called, "is bogged down in paperwork," the study concludes, and recommends computerizing the computer division.

This is what I call the Educational Twilight Zone, and I can go on with stories. For example: the classroom that was finally divided in half by a

wall to accommodate two small special education classes that had been sharing one large room. The teachers were overjoyed. Only one problem: the workmen never put an additional light switch in the second room, so every time someone turns the switch off in one room, the lights go out in the other.

Or the lunchtime meeting a principal called, saying it was "voluntary but essential." In other words, you will volunteer.

It's not unusual in education for one thing to be announced and another to be done. That's why many of us are healthily skeptical of all the talk about education reform.

And that is also why we admire the efforts you are making here.

We know that in Dade County there are real partnerships, not just rhetorical ones, that those of you in the pilot schools are truly being urged to dream, and your dreams are finding support along the rocky road to becoming reality.

And our dreams, after all, really are what schools should be about.

You know, I grew up just north of here -- same beach, same ocean -- except for the medical waste in ours -- pretty much the same people -- in Coney Island. The schools were salvation for me and for all the other kids on my block. I'm sure the same is true for most of you. Our parents were either

first or second generation immigrants. Neither of mine completed high school. They loved me, they wanted me to do better than they had done, and they depended totally on the school for that.

They depended on the school for a lot. For example, it wasn't until first grade, when the school required eye tests, that they found out I needed eyeglasses. It wasn't until the school required a note from a dentist that I got taken to one. And it wasn't until Miss Bezman in second grade gave books as gifts for us to take home and keep that they saw and understood that they could do the same to feed my love of reading.

My school, PS 188, was warm in winter and in the spring cool breezes came through the open windows from the Bay. The floors were waxed, the

doorknobs shiny brass, the wooden desks smooth and polished. It was a special, clean, safe, wondrous place, where a breathtakingly limitless world began to unfold for me. I was intimidated, but I was nurtured and encouraged.

I made special friends, school friends, who were different from my street friends, and who enlarged my world from Neptune Avenue and 31st Street to at least as far as 30 blocks away, where sights and smells and family customs were frequently quite different from mine.

My mother did the best she could, though it was limited, to support my education. But when, on the eve of my graduation from PS 188, she was informed I'd passed the test for Hunter College's special secondary school, she faltered. She would

not let me travel to Manhattan -- to "the City" -- to school every day. And so I went to my neighborhood junior high, then on to James Madison High, a 15-minute bus ride from home. Ordinary neighborhood schools -- not magnets, not theme schools. But I got a first-class education.

And, to make a long story short, here I am: A success -- certainly in my mother's eyes -- and very largely thanks to public schools.

But today too many of our schools are not providing the same safe havens, and the same road out of poverty, to millions of kids who are just the same as you and I were, and not that long ago.

Not that everything was wonderful then -- not by any means. But then the kids who dropped out, who didn't make it through -- and maybe even most of them didn't -- ended up in manufacturing or industrial jobs that paid decently and enabled them to live decent lives and support families.

Some time ago, the New York Times reported a reunion of the "Dux" of Stone Avenue, a basketball team of street kids from PS 184 in Brownsville in the heart of Brooklyn in the 1920s, when Brownsville was predominantly Jewish. The reunion took place here in Florida -- where else? -- where all of them now live as retirees. What interested me was that hardly any of the teammates had finished high school. Almost all of them dropped out to work. (Let me read a quote from the article) "'If you went to high school...' said

one of the men, finishing the sentence with a low, reverent whistle. 'Wow! And college! That was only for the doctors and lawyers.'"

It struck me reading that how the world is indeed different. How many kids without high school diplomas today will get jobs that will allow them to retire to Florida? Or the Southwest, or wherever else people from Miami retire to? None. Without a high school education today, a youngster is lost, completely lost.

But today, even for the kids who struggle to stay in school and manage to do so, the experience is considerably different, especially in our inner cities.

Very few doorknobs are important looking shiny brass. Windows are often broken and dirty.

Lighting, so important to success in school, is often inadequate. Hallways are dark and dingy, furniture is broken and scarred, supplies and books are old, or vanished, or not enough to go around.

Safety in our poor neighborhoods in urban centers is a major problem. And because of the drug epidemic, children now are carrying guns to school along with their pencils and notebooks. Recently we had the incredible experience of a kindergartner bringing a loaded automatic to a crowded school lunchroom.

Most people reading newspaper accounts of the rioting in Miami a couple of weeks ago I'm sure didn't think about the teachers who go into tough neighborhoods every day. I did, though. I

thought about the teachers trying heroically to make education relevant and important to kids traumatized by the lives they lead -- the broken families, the brutal poverty so many of them face.

In New York City -- and I know we're not unique, despite the attention we get -- children are old before their time. Too many are responsible for themselves at an early age, and usually for siblings as well. Too many of them are introduced to violence and sex before puberty. And the magical world of books that helped save many of us is foreign to these TV-born-and-bred kids for whom headsets and video cassettes bring sensory pleasure which requires little or no exercise of critical thinking skills.

So what are the schools to do? Certainly not what we've been doing for the last 100 years. We cannot continue to run our schools as top-down factories, giving teachers circumscribed orders from on high -- and expect this new generation of youngsters to discover the joys of learning. We can't just lecture kids who see and talk only pictures, and we can't expect teachers to succeed with oversized classes, state-mandated curricula, lack of support for discipline, and the requirement to follow orders and do as they are told.

I spend most of my lunchtimes talking with teachers in school cafeterias -- or whichever room they brown-bag it in when there is no cafeteria.

Now, we've come a long way. We finally have gotten rid of the time clocks we were forced to punch since the turn of the century, and we've started a lot of school-based programs which give teachers a great deal of authority in school decision-making. We have colleagues with supportive principals working together to break new ground in teacher-created and directed ungraded primary programs, in team-teaching arrangments in a couple of our huge high schools, and many other projects which never could have happened just two or three years ago.

But none of it is systemic, as yours is. None of it is being nurtured and driven by a total school system commitment to staff development and support for the intellectual, pedagogical, and practical needs of teachers.

Despite the reform movement, most inner city teachers are isolated in their classrooms, buried in paperwork, bereft of appropriate modern equipment and technology -- or even clean new textbooks -- and burnt out trying to reach a new generation of incredibly burdened youngsters without the information, support, and different school structure they need to help them.

Let's look for a minute or two at our kids.

In our city -- and I'm sure your situation is similar -- 40 percent of our youngsters are living at or below the poverty line -- not working class poverty, but brutal, inhuman poverty that means

hunger, surroundings filled with prostitution, drug dealing, addiction, violence, and abuse.

Nationally, half a million babies are born to teenage mothers each year, and usually they've had no pre-natal care, their birth weight is low, and they are malnourished. By the time they reach school age, they have accumulated large deficits. Thousands are born with AIDS or with a drug addiction.

Tens of thousands of our students are homeless, or living in shelters, or doubled up with other families, or even on the streets.

Of course, schools cannot solve all the terrible problems our children live with, but they can make a very great difference. Universal preschools,

starting at very young ages, make a difference. Breakfast, lunch, and even dinner in schools with extended after-school programs make a difference. Parenting programs, breaking schools down to smaller units where students are less anonymous, work-study arrangements, alternative schools -- all of these make a difference. We fight for them, we support them.

But when all is said and done, in schools it is the teacher who makes the main difference. No program, no new technology, no matter how excellent -- and much of it is -- can work without being applied and delivered by the thinking, breathing classroom professional. At bottom, it is the relationship between student and teacher which creates learning.

Which is why the issue of teacher professionalism is so central to the ultimate improvement of our schools.

We must free our teachers from the shackles of 40 or 50 minute periods, from the bus duty, the hall duty, the clerical work, the babysitting, the toilet patrol.

We must free our teachers and give them time -- and pay for their time if it doesn't exist within the present school day -- give them time to think, to discuss, to share with each other the problems and pains and breakthroughs and brainstorms that now they experience only in isolation. When I talk to teachers -- when I listen to teachers -- I hear their need to be respected for what they know -- and to search with their colleagues for solutions they don't now have.

Isn't it mind-boggling, especially when one thinks of the amount of exchange that goes on in other professions, like law and medicine, that most teachers never see another teacher teach?

One might almost think schools are organized to divide and conquer -- keeping teachers and students contained in their own boxes.

Instead of being organized for cooperation, collegiality, and problem-solving.

It's commonly said, and correctly so, that to meet the demands of today's job market, students need to be able to use creativity, imagination, and analytic capacity. They need to be able to adapt to change in the workplace and keep up with new technology.

Yet in many of our large schools, all the teachers don't even know each other well! And they don't know what their colleagues know about their very same students. As in other client-centered professions, teachers have to engage in constant feedback, judgment, analysis of progress -- in addition to all the caring, human ways they relate to their students.

And to do this for today's youngsters, with all their problems and differences, teaching needs to be custom-tailored, and teachers have to be able to engage in an ongoing search to find new ways to reach them.

Schools have to be organized so that teachers -- all teachers -- can meet regularly, perhaps in

different configurations -- by grade or department or across disciplines.

Teachers have to meet to share and to make decisions about the assignment of students, courses of study, program development, assessment and evaluation, and their own schedules.

They have to have the authority, equal to the principal's, to determine the organization of the school day and the allocation of the school's resources. And here, of course, is where we encounter some problems.

Yesterday, I met with UFT members in a typical large high school with an awful dropout rate, and discussed these very issues. The principal, a nice man, an oldtimer, was typically uptight about

my visit. I don't know why they get that way, but they do.

(I knew I had really made it when schools began to get cleaned up before my scheduled arrival.)

So -- I went to see him with our chapter leader after the union meeting to tell him how interested his staff was in learning about how some other schools had worked on some of the same problems. I suggested that a staff development day, which happened to be scheduled for next week, could be used to do that, and I offered the resources of the Teacher Center.

But guess what? Apologetically, regretfully, mournfully, the principal explained he had already fully planned that day for the staff! All by

himself he had done this, for a staff of close to 300 teachers, without saying a word to any one of them!

What a burden on that poor man! And what a burden that day will be on those poor teachers. As any enlightened, successful principal will tell you -- they too need the sharing. They need to share the responsibility, the risk, the ideas, the problems, the solutions.

No one can be a true leader without doing that.

And no school can fully succeed or solve its problems without an honest partnership among teachers, supervisors, and parents.

Which brings me back to why what you are doing here in Dade County is so important. In my meetings with teachers in New York, as we struggle to bring our schools into the modern age, we talk about places like Dade County, and Rochester, and Hammond, and Pittsburgh -- all AFT cities, by the way -- where herculean efforts to reform education, to professionalize teaching are taking place. And we are learning from your work.

We are watching your system's commitment to shared decision-making, and all the difficulties involved in its implementation. We are watching your system's commitment to nurturing professionalism, to staff development, to collegiality. We know you still have lots to do -- as do our colleagues in Rochester and elsewhere. But we admire the

great cooperative efforts you are making and we applaud your successes as they mount.

New York City and Miami, after all, have a great deal in common -- aside from the fact that thousands of our active retired UFT members are here and that hordes of our relatives are here seeking your wonderful sun.

What we have in common is that both cities are gateways to the promise of America, with all the wonders and all the woes that brings.

Today, New York City and Miami are experiencing a wave of immigration as high as or higher than what passed through Ellis Island in the early years of

this century. And schools played a central role then, in the lives of our parents and grandparents.

But our society and the world are very different places in the 1980s from what they were at the turn of the century. First, there is the change from a manufacturing and industrial economy to a service and technological one, which requires at least a high school diploma and probably some college in order to get a job that can support a family.

And second, there is much less hope and much more anger among the poor because of the unfulfilled promise of the American Dream.

The Committee on Economic Development, a national business group devoted to the support of education

reform, said it well in a report they issued called Children in Need:

(And I quote) "Almost alone among the great nations of the world, the United States cannot be defined in terms of place of origin, race, religion, or ancestry. Instead, our nation is defined by a vision -- a dream that welcomes anyone who shares it.

But this vision is now becoming more distant for a growing underclass of Americans condemned by both discrimination and ignorance to only limited participation in mainstream social, political, and economic life." (End quote) This is the business community of America speaking.

Indeed, there is much to worry about -- not just that our productivity will fall and we will become

a second- or third-rate power because of an unskilled work force -- though that is a very great danger and we have already started down that road.

But, even worse, there is the danger that the bold and beautiful and unparalled experiment in democracy that we represent and that our public schools have nurtured and preserved will falter and die because of our inability to educate the least of us and bring them into the mainstream of American life.

And there is the danger that our failure to do so will lead to the demise of our public education system itself.

And what a tragedy that would be for America. For our children would lose the access we give them to

history, to drama, to culture, to life. The language of dreams is learned in school and can only be taught by teachers who too are free to dream.

I wish you well. I urge you on. On behalf of teachers elsewhere, I applaud you and I thank you.