



## AFT Leads Drive for Excellence, Reforms

The AFT has a golden opportunity to take the lead in the current debate about quality in public education, AFT president Albert Shanker told the executive council last week.

For the first time in over a decade, education is at the top of the national agenda as reports and state proposals dealing with education come out almost daily.

Although all the reports exaggerate the problems of public education, they are designed to get action, "and a balanced picture is not the best thing for effective persuasion," Shanker said. On the other hand, all the reports do call for large increases in teacher salaries, and these are reports written by business leaders and state officials, not teacher unions, he added.

While most of the reports also contain items that the AFT has traditionally opposed, such as merit pay, the difference between these reports and previous ones is that they are offered in the spirit of cooperation, with a true desire for positive change, Shanker said.

"It would be a terrible mistake to criticize these reports," Shanker added. It would confirm the feeling that public education is a massive institution totally resistant to change—and would cause an outpouring of support and funds away from public schools and toward private schools. The NEA has made the mistake of categorically dismissing these new proposals, but the AFT executive council supported Shanker in a move to study these ideas and help improve education and the lot of teachers.

### AFT Must Be Willing To Consider Changes

"Education in this country is now in a situation not much different than that of the automobile and steel industries 10 years ago: we can see all kinds of things coming," Shanker said. While these two industries knew what was happening in the international market they did not take action, and now they may be on the way toward extinction. If public education is not to go the same way, it must agree to change, Shanker said.

As a first step in this new dialogue, Shanker invited Education Secretary Terrel Bell to meet with the council in an off-the-record session to talk about areas of agreement on the reports.

The AFT will also set up a series of regional conferences and retreats for teachers and policymakers to discuss some of the new proposals. In addition, this year's AFT convention will serve as a forum for some of the leading thinkers in this area. Over the next year, AFT will develop its own plan of action to improve public education.

If the AFT refused to cooperate in this dialogue, teachers may have certain changes thrust upon them unilaterally, Shanker said. The AFT must be willing to discuss all proposals, including merit pay, he added. The union has had very good reasons for opposing merit pay and some master teacher plans over the years, but some of the new proposals are resolving some of the objections, Shanker said.

A proposal by Tennessee governor Lamar Alexander, for example, calls for merit review, but the evaluation would be made by a state commission whose members would include teachers selected by teacher organizations, Shanker said. And whereas most merit plans provide for only a few teachers to get pay increases, in Tennessee 30 to 60 percent of all teachers would be eligible for the raise, Shanker said.

Teachers in Tennessee would be given additional responsibilities, such as overseeing student teachers and developing the curriculum, along with the additional pay. This could provide a ladder of advancement for teachers who would develop new skills while remaining in the classroom. And as teachers take on new jobs, the role of the principal and assistant principal could be modified.

"The factory relationship in the school could very well change and a new type of professional status for teachers could develop," Shanker said. The AFT is providing input to decision-makers in Tennessee as the plan is being developed.

The executive council spent several hours discussing some of these new plans and their implications for teachers and the union. They agreed that this is a time of tremendous opportunity for increasing teacher salaries since public interest is focused on education. While some of the plans pose certain risks for teacher unionists, great gains sometimes require great risks, several AFT vice presidents commented during the meeting.

In summing up, Shanker said that public education currently requires \$20 to \$40 billion in new funds if some of the improvements called for by the various reports are to be made. "If you can't get an infusion without strings attached, the question is whether you believe in the institution strongly enough to pay the price," he said.

### Reagan Renews Attacks Despite These Overtures

Ironically, the day after the union made these apparent goodwill gestures toward the administration, President Reagan delivered yet another stinging attack on public schools and teachers. In his speech at graduation ceremonies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, the president again made his pitch for tuition tax credits and criticized "the heaviest hitters in the national education lobby" for opposing pay and promotions on the basis of merit and competence.

"Constructive criticism is one thing," Shanker commented, but the president's comments "serve one purpose—and that is directly contributing to an already low level of self-esteem by teachers."

### AFT CONVENTION NOTICE

The 67th annual AFT convention is set for July 4 through 8 in Los Angeles. Credentials must be received in the national office by June 17.



# Where We Stand

by Albert Shanker President, American Federation of Teachers

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NYSTUE

## Will Teachers Take Part in Education Reform?

### We Should Be Ready to Sit and Talk

There's many a slip between the headline and the lip, I discovered last weekend. I made an hour-long speech to the annual convention of the New York State United Teachers in which I said some pretty unusual things for a teacher union president. But the headline in *The New York Times* went me one better. The main headline in Sunday's page one story was fine, "Shanker Urges Teachers to Aid School Reform." Indeed, I did that . . . and more. But the subhead said, "Endorses a Longer Day in Return for Raises," and that I did not do. What was it I said that apparently so inspired the headline writer?

I pointed out to the nearly 3,000 delegates . . . teachers from throughout New York State . . . that there was a new and very different climate in education. The reports and proposals coming out now, while sharply critical of American education, are not from the same cast of characters who used to attack teachers and public schools in the 1960s and 1970s. By and large, these reports are coming from prestigious national and state groups of business leaders, governors and educators seriously worried about the condition of American education in terms of the national interest. And not only worried, but prepared to support huge increases in funding for education and compensation for teachers, provided that certain changes are instituted which would, in their view, spur improvement.

There are many different proposals—from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, from the California Round Table, from the National Task Force on Education and Economic Growth, from a task force put together by the Twentieth Century Fund. There are suggestions for a longer school day and/or a longer school year; there are suggestions for different salaries for different kinds of teachers—teachers in shortage areas like math and science or teachers who are judged, by one method or another, to be superior; there are proposals to make it somewhat easier to get incompetent teachers out of schools. These are ideas that teachers and their unions traditionally have shunned—most often because they're either impractical or unfair in implementation.

But these new groups are also saying something else. They're saying, in effect, "We recognize that teachers are too poorly paid for teaching to be attractive to the best and brightest of our young people. We also recognize that teachers often work under difficult conditions and get very little public support. And we believe that what's happened with education is not the fault of teachers but of our society's de-emphasis on excellence in education. We want tougher curriculum and higher standards for student discipline and achievement. We're willing to help—to pour new billions into education—if you're willing to make some of the changes we want."

Now what was it that I actually urged? Because I didn't speak from a prepared text, I'm quoting from the long transcript. I told the delegates that teacher reaction to these reports "should be based on what is really now happening and should not be a knee-jerk type of response to things that happened in the past," and that we were confronted with "some of the greatest opportunities that we have ever faced in terms of improving schools, improving the conditions of teachers, improving the salaries of teachers, improving our status." I said I believed "that the future of public education will largely depend on how we respond to what they are proposing." And here's how I concluded:

"I would strongly urge that as each of these reports come out, instead of automatic rejection, we view them and the people who are making them not as enemies, but as potential allies and as potential friends and potential supporters of education. And instead of automatically rejecting, we ought to say, 'We welcome your concern, we welcome your involvement and your support. We don't agree with everything that you are proposing, but we know that you are intelligent people, you have built your own industries and you have a lot of organizational know-how.

"We know our own industry pretty well, too. This thing is too important for us to get into a big initial fight as to whether this idea is a good one or that idea is a bad one. Let's sit down. We will listen to your ideas and we will listen sympathetically. We will tell you what we think will happen if your ideas are implemented and applied. We will try to meet you part way, and it is essential that we do put this together, because if you in business and industry who are at the point of urging that billions of additional dollars come into education and that teachers' salaries get moved up 50 percent or even doubled, that the federal and state governments really invest, if you should lose hope or lose faith or think that you can't do anything about public education, that improvements are impossible and move away, then indeed we will have lost a tremendous opportunity and we will be left to fight for public schools ourselves." And then I told the delegates:

"There are billions of dollars sitting there which weren't there yesterday and which we can get for public education if we rise to the challenge of sitting down with top leaders in our country who will talk to us as equals and we will talk to them as equals. We now have an opportunity to bring status to American teachers and money to American education, an opportunity which we never had before, and I'm sure we won't miss it."

And how did the 3,000 teachers in Albany react to this talk which asked them to think the previously unthinkable? By my own recollection, and the words of the *Times* reporter who was there, they stood and applauded.

NEWSCLIP BITTERS  
From the Office of Public Relations

Newspaper  
Date 5/18/83  
M. J. Jones