



555 NEW JERSEY AVENUE N.W.
WASHINGTON, DC 20001
202-879-4400

ALBERT SHANKER
President

file
1) Shanker testimony ✓
2) Nat. Gov Assn
3) Early childh

TESTIMONY OF ALBERT SHANKER BEFORE THE NGA TASK FORCE ON SCHOOL READINESS
PITTSBURGH, PA.
MARCH 31, 1986

My name is Albert Shanker, and I am president of the 620,000 members of the American Federation of Teachers, most of whom are k-12 public school teachers in our nation's cities.

I am here to tell you what they tell me and what I see as I visit our (locals) and schools, and that is that there is a catastrophe occurring in this nation that exceeds anything you have heard in your Task Force hearings and, indeed, anything you can imagine. I am talking about children, in many cities a majority, whose situations are not unlike a modern version of the story of the Wild Boy of Aveyron. I do not exaggerate.

There are children from the ages of one day to the time they start school who are virtually without adult care. They may receive basic feeding, cleaning and the like - but for the majority of the day they are left alone, devoid of stimulation, lacking all but random or erratic human contact. They have never heard a story read or a song sung; they have never seen a game played or a toy manipulated for them. They are sometimes victims of violence, and frequently witnesses to it. They learn how to survive at an early age, and are intimately familiar with dramas we only read about. They know existence well; they know nothing about living or life as it can be lived. Their situations and their prospects are horrifying.

When our teachers meet these children in school, even as early as kindergarten, if that is available, here is what they find: 5,6,7 year olds who do not know colors or shapes, who sometimes do not even know their given names; children who do not know the relationships among parts of their body, who do not even have the

physical developmental capacity to play a circle game, let alone hold a pencil or crayon; English-speaking children whose English is so far from standard as to be a foreign language; children who flinch at every sudden adult movement and who do not have the conceptual apparatus to communicate, let alone gratify, the most basic needs.

I am talking about the reason that, in many of our school districts, a majority of the students have been labeled learning disabled. Their disabilities have nothing to do with neurological processes or brain anomalies -- dyslexia, dysgraphia, and the like. They have not been disabled by nature but by life. And, indeed, their disabilities are as deep and profound as those once studied in foundling hospitals, where otherwise normal children left to languish either died or became as retarded as those born that way.

Those children -- and remember, I am not speaking of so-called special populations, a minority, but of a majority in many urban and poor rural areas -- if they are fortunate enough to have a public kindergarten available to them, often fail in kindergarten. And why? Because most of our kindergartens are now organized on the assumption that colors, shapes, pencil-holding -- that is, basic coordination and conceptual skills -- have been mastered, so that the cognitive development necessary to handle first grade has become their first responsibility. But these children are not even ready for readiness. In kindergartens still organized around play, we even find that many of these children do not know how to engage in organized play. If the kindergartens drop readiness skills and deal with the readiness-for-readiness needs of the students, then the children will remain unprepared for real first-grade work (unless we want to consign them to low tracks they can never get out of because they were never brought up to par in the first place). And yet, if the children are left back, they are generally doomed merely to repetition because they must be slotted into the available program -- and absorbed into the new crop of students to further swell class sizes. The system moves inexorably forward or backward in ways that these children do not.

Compared to the situation of children who have no public kindergarten available, these problems are a luxury. After all, they are easily solved: provide two levels of kindergarten or extend the kindergarten program, so that whatever route is taken children entering the first grade are prepared to handle real first-grade work. The result may be first-graders who are a year older than typical first graders in middle-class suburbs, but the alternative is properly aged first graders at a preschool level who will become properly aged fourth graders at a first grade level. Another name for this latter group is future high school dropouts.

So this problem is easily solved: let the requirements of the children, not the system, drive the nature and time of the kindergarten program in the school, and spend some additional money up front to prevent the staggering costs in constant remediation, impossible catchup, and dropouts at the end.

Solving the problems of disadvantaged children whose first exposure to education, even to organized play, comes with first grade at 6 or 7 or more is a harder proposition. With no nurture, nature itself has been slowed down. A pre-schooler does not become a "schooler" merely by virtue of a label. In elementary schools that do not begin until first grade and that are populated by the children I have described, there is no 1-5 or 1-6 grade system, there is only remedial 1-5 or 1-6, which is to say there is only a preschool to grade 2 or 3 system. Consequently, while those districts may have nominal junior high or senior high schools, there are in fact only elementary schools in operation in the district.

Do you wonder then at the shocking below-grade test scores? The answer is simple: the grade levels which are being tested do not exist. For if everyone at first-grade level is in fact at a pre-school level, then you can be certain that, no matter what putative grade they attain, the majority of those children will never do more or test at more than 6th grade work.

From the moment, then, that we put pre-school level children in first grade, just because their age dictates they should be there, we doom them and determine the

outcomes of the system. Show me the best first-grade class in the world and populate it with children who do not know colors or shapes and who cannot manipulate a pencil, and I will show you a school that will soon be excoriated in the media for the failure of its education and the incompetence of its teachers.

So what is to be done? You have heard some of the answers already, today and during previous hearings. One imperative is public kindergarten for five-year-olds, certainly for disadvantaged children and preferably all day. The recommendation is not new to you. What is so hard to fathom, given just the barest details of the catastrophe I have described, is that there is still a debate over the kindergarten question at all. So much fear over consigning children to the "state" for "early socialization" -- and such complacency about consigning them to the tutelage of mean streets. Such reluctance to make the investment, even though it dwarfs that of any expenditure we currently make to overcome the effects of not making such an educational investment. Such lingering faith that maturation alone will ready children for first grade -- and such readiness to permit every first-grade class to be a remedial first grade.

Equally important, especially if you want to maximize the results of a kindergarten program and restore some meaning to "grade-level" work (and you know that I have fundamental questions even about the concept of grades and the current lock-step system we have inherited from nineteenth-century factories) is a systematic, public pre-school program. After all, we currently have a pre-school system. However, it is private and open only to families that can pay.

The pre-school recommendation is also not new to you. I won't rehearse the empirical evidence you have already heard on the effectiveness of quality pre-school programs. It has already convinced families of means, for whom the benefits, educationally speaking, are less clear than they are for the disadvantaged, and they have already privately funded such a system. You are probably also aware that the costs of such programs are far outweighed by the benefits. Poor children who have attended sound

pre-school programs are better prepared for school, have less need for special education, are less likely to repeat grades and drop out, and have lower delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency rates. The availability of such programs is frequently also the single greatest reason that welfare mothers can seek education, training, and work. An investment in pre-school programs is not, then, only an investment in children but also in adults. To speak of these programs as an additional drain on public resources is to miss the point: they are a great savings, an efficiency with a human face.

If the present administration were really serious about equalizing educational opportunities and giving poor children the same advantages now enjoyed by privileged children, they would not be talking about voucher schemes to give poor children mythical access to private schools or wealthy suburban public schools. That is a costly farce, symbolic politics at its worst. The administration would instead, direct the money it has always managed to find when proposing tuition tax credits, deductions, or vouchers -- and I am here speaking of new monies, not schemes to redirect existing public education funds to subsidize private education -- toward a program of funding pre-school programs for all disadvantaged children

Is the administration serious about increasing choice in education? Then consider that while families of middle income and above now have the choice to purchase preschool education -- and the majority are exercising it -- poor families do not. For families with incomes below \$10,000, the preschool enrollment rate is only 29%; fewer than one out of 3 poor children even have the opportunity to participate in preschool programs. For families with incomes of \$20,000 and above, the pre-school enrollment rate is 52% and growing; theoretically, every family with means can offer their children this headstart.

The administration has it wrong, then. The real choice issues, not the theoretical ones, the real dual school system, not the one they threaten to create, lie in the fact that privileged children, unlike poor children, have access to pre-schools and the opportunity to become ready for and able at school and life.

If the federal government were to take responsibility for enabling poor parents to provide pre-school opportunities for their children, as other parents now can do, it could also make a conceptual leap forward on welfare reform. Current welfare discussions tend to focus on how tight or loose to weave or cast the social safety net for adults. In the meantime, our teachers see the children who have fallen through the net into the abyss. To the extent that there are programs to educate or train these children's parents, they largely are independent of the welfare system, sponsored by other social agencies, oblivious to the needs of welfare children, and indifferent to their clients as parents as well as potential workers. If families are the chief educative unit of society, then why does the welfare system not treat families that way? If the literacy of parents and the future literacy of their children are inextricably linked, then why do parents have to weigh the tradeoffs between enrolling in an adult literacy program or leaving their pre-school aged children home unattended?

In short, one of the greatest advances our welfare system could make would be to link the education and training opportunities for dependent adults with educational opportunities for their children, be this training in good parenting through training as aides in pre-school programs their children attend or training in literacy alongside their children, and the like. One program I recently heard of, not part of the welfare system but the school system, illustrates the point (and the dire need for after-school programs). This is a program of after-school computer assisted instruction available and suitable for parents and children alike. The setting is like a laboratory, with individual carrels where students and their parents can work on their own assignments at their own pace. In some cases, the children are more advanced than their parents, but there is no shame involved, for the privacy of the carrel and the terminal with its self-paced programs ensures that only the teacher and aides know what level a child or parent is at, and can offer individual help accordingly. In one program, then, children have after-school care and instruction,

parents are attaining literacy and learning the skill of typing and word-processing, as well as finding a structured way of becoming involved in their children's education, development, and care. It is a program worth replicating, and a model of family welfare that the welfare system, with its disconnected cuts at parts of a family or a person, could emulate.

We do!
In the same way that we need to integrate the education of children and parents and the education and training of parents as parents into the welfare system, it is time that we ceased treating the problem of at-risk children solely as an issue for the educational system. It is not. It is an issue for the welfare system, the public health-care, housing, community and economic development, parks and recreation, and criminal justice system. It involves every social agency.

I am aware that every social agency currently has a myriad of programs to deal with some aspect of the problem. Some of these programs are excellent, and many of our children are benefiting from them. But to participate in all the programs set up to meet the needs of disadvantaged children and their parents involves criss-crossing the city from morning till night, meeting a welter of conflicting eligibility requirements, negotiating through agencies and programs that frequently work at cross purposes and in the dark about one another, and ultimately, having the time and wherewithal to participate in perhaps one program meeting one narrow need.

Cries for greater coordination and efficiency will avail nothing. Bureaucracies are not set up that way, and calls for coordination in the past have invariably led to a reduction, not an integration, of services. Or they have typically led to delegating so many responsibilities and tasks to the schools, because they are central, visible, and yes, responsive, that their educational functions are overwhelmed.

There is an alternative. I would here like to enter into the record a description of an approach to coordination and integration of services currently being tried in Dade County, Florida. It began in July 1984 with an unusual grand jury study, involves a multiple agency, public-private approach (including our teachers' union), and a strategy

for the prevention of youth problems that encompasses pre-school to community development programs. Rather than hoping that eligible people will find the programs, the program are now located where those who need them live. Rather than treating the education and training of parents as discrete from the school-readiness problems of their children, the approach is to view the two as linked. And rather than promote a competition among programs for scarce resources and for "turf," the approach has fostered an unprecedented degree of cooperation and mutual deployment of programs and resources towards a common end. It is an intelligent, humane and efficient approach, and it appears to be working.

ENTER DADE COUNTY SCHOOLS AND NEIGHBORHOOD CONSORTIUM INTO RECORD

In conclusion, let me bring you back to my starting point: the masses of children our members daily see who have slipped so far behind that no social safety net we may later devise can lift them up again. We can no longer merely cluck over the problems of "these" people, the ever-present "they" that lets us off the hook. These are our problems, they are our fellow citizens and our future. To know so well what to do and not to do it is criminal.