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AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

PRESS CONFERENCE

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Albert Shanker
President
American Federation of Teachers
MS. SHEKETOFF: Good morning. Welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Emily Sheketoff, with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. This morning our morning newsmaker is Albert Shanker, president of the American Teachers Federation and also on the executive council of the AFL-CIO. Mr. Shanker serves on committees concerned with education, labor, and international human rights. He will speak for about 15 minutes and then take questions.

I would like to remind those who may not be familiar with our format to please state your name and organization before asking your question.

We will turn now to the man Woody Allen said started World War III, Mr. Albert Shanker.

MR. SHANKER: Good morning. Thank you for being here this morning. It's a pleasure to be have this opportunity and make some remarks on the occasion of the opening of this school year.

It's very important to note that this school year is marked by what is probably the smallest number of teachers strikes that we have seen in many, many years. I think that is evidence of a cooperative relationship brought about largely in the interest in the educational forum and by the involvement of the business community and Governors
across the country.

The other thing that we see all across the country is that while in 15,000 school districts most of them are making changes that are legislated, that we see this year a larger number of school districts across the country that are trying some basic and fundamental changes. The analysis that we have gotten in recent years from the national assessment of educational progress is one that leads to the conclusion that we need more than reform if reform implies that some relatively minor tinkering or shaping up of school systems, and that what we need is a fairly major overhaul.

Some of those results I will just spend a minute to cite and show how much change, fundamental change, is needed on the national assessment of progress, examinations, and assessments. In reading and literacy, we find that while practically everyone in our country can read a stop sign or an exit sign and can open up a box and follow simple instructions, that when you get to the ability to read a newspaper on the reading level, say, of the Washington Post or the New York Times, you are down to about 36 or 37 percent of those still in high school at the age of 17-1/2, so that we are measuring the successful students, those who are still there, not those who drop out.

When you move to a slightly more difficult level
-- that is, how many can read an airline timetable or a railroad timetable, not so important in and of themselves but very important if somebody is to read the material in the World Almanac, a spreadsheet or anything else -- then you are down to 4.7 percent of those students who are still in school, the successful ones, not the dropouts, only 4.7 who can look at a chart and sort of combine the headings at the top of the chart, look at the numbers and get the information from it. Extremely low.

If we move over to the analysis of writing, the writing report card, and once again we assign a very simple task to 17-1/2-year-olds -- these are again the successful ones, those who are still in school, not the dropouts -- and ask them to write a letter to a prospective employer applying for a job, and how many of them can write the letter using some evidence indicating to the employer that he or she knows what the two or three major qualifications for the job are, and then offering evidence that I should be hired for this job because, "Yes, I can take care of money, I worked in my father's store until two years ago, and that was fine. And I know you need somebody who his reliable, and I had the following job at church and Boy Scouts, and I always did this." That is someone who can muster evidence and write a persuasive letter of that sort.

Of those who are still in high school at 17-1/2,
only 20 percent of them can write such a letter.

When you move to mathematics, only about 27 percent of those still in school at 17-1/2 can do a simple problem which involves more than one step. That is, the numbers aren't very difficult, but you have to know that first you subtract, then you multiply or do some other sequence of basic numerical manipulations.

Well, if we had a system in which 65 or 70 or 75 percent of the students were doing well, then reform would be the right thing to do. It would just mean shaping up what we are doing, the system that we have, and doing things a little better. But when we get results that show that only 4.7 percent can read a simple chart and only 20 percent can write a letter, not at a level of brilliance but at a level of moderate acceptability, and that only 27 percent can do fairly simple mathematical problems, we have to reach the conclusion that reform is not enough and that what we need is a very major change in our schools.

We are not trying to get five or ten percentage points of improvement, we are trying to get a percentage of students who succeed in these various things to move from the 4.7 or 20 or 27 percent mark up to the 75 or 80 percent mark.

That is not going to be done by teaching a little better, getting a slightly better textbook, adding a little
more time onto the day. It is going to be done only with some fundamental rethinking.

So I am very happy that this year a number of school districts have moved toward making some basic changes. I am going to leave some out, but I am going to mention a few.

Dade County has embarked on a very interesting program of school-based management. They invited their faculties to meet last year and to discuss how they would change the school if they had no rules and regulations imposed upon them, how they would govern the school and what substantive changes they would make, and the schools that came through with the best proposals have been granted their wish.

That is, they are not beginning a program in which they will be relatively free from regulation and in which the teachers and supervisors on the spot within those schools can manage themselves. We are looking forward to some very interesting, different schools as a result of that.

Hammond, Indiana, has a school-based management program which is very interesting and very exciting, in which the entire faculty plays an important part.

Some of the new contractual provisions in the New York City contract are outstanding. That is a provision
which says that the faculty of a school can vote to suspend
a particular point in the union contract if it believes that
suspending that particular point in the union contract is in
the best interests of good education within that school.

That is a very important movement away from
bureaucratically run schools, and I am sure that the
teachers who go to those schools are probably going to say,
"We are willing to suspend this item of the contract if the
board of education is willing to suspend some of its own
bureaucratic rules which prevent us from doing things," and
will result in a lot more school-based decision making.

The movement in Rochester, New York, which is a
very extensive involvement of the entire faculty in running
schools, in training new teachers, in deciding who remains
as a teacher, and assisting experienced teachers who are not
doing such a good job, involving teachers as adjunct
professors at the University of Rochester. So that
experienced teachers within the system become the professors
who are training new teachers who come in. All of these are
very new and very exciting approaches.

The rationale for this is very clear. The first
wave of reform consisted of having states like California,
Texas, and Florida impose a big, fat pack of rules and
regulations either by the state commission, or usually
through the state legislature and signed by the Governor.
We favored most of those reforms, and we favored them because we believed that local districts were not doing a good job themselves.

But that is not a good way to run a school system. That is, somebody in the state capital should not be telling local people. You wouldn't your medical system to run that way. You wouldn't want a law passed somewhere in the state capital telling every hospital and every doctor exactly what to do.

You want well-trained, intelligent people on hospital staffs looking at you, asking you questions, and making judgments on the basis of what is right and what is wrong for you. That's what we need in education.

What is good about the schools I was just talking about -- the Dade Counties and the Rochesters and the Hammonds and the Toledos and the New York Cities -- is that there is the beginning of a recognition that schools are not going to improve substantially by being kicked from above and being told what to do by some remote group of people. They are only going to improve substantially if there is total involvement of the people who are on a school site who keep asking questions, "What is right for this place? What is wrong with it? What changes need to be made?"

That implies that the people at those sites have to have the power to make the changes. Up to now we have
had many complaints that OES, "We could run the place better," they say, "We would run it differently, but they won't let us." And "they" was always the board of ed, the union contract, the state education department, the legislative rules.

We are beginning now to move into a system which is away from regulation and toward creativity and involvement of individual schools, and I applaud that.

I would like to spend a few minutes on the upcoming presidential debate, on presidential candidates' debate on education, and say, first of all, that I think it is very significant that the presidential candidates, that there will be a national focus.

This, of course, stems from the continuing interest on the part of the business community, and indeed the Governors and the whole country, on the problem of competitiveness. That has not gone away. It won't go away for quite some time. Our schools are not going to be turned around in one or two years. This is a project for at last a decade, and it's really a continuing project after that.

Therefore, that continuing interest is very welcome and very important. The things that I would hope presidential candidates would commit themselves to are the following:

First, we expect that there will be on the part
of the majority of candidates some financial commitments and essentially the financial -- I don't have a number that I want to pull out of my head because I think one of the important contributions of the school reform movement is to say that the schools themselves ought to be market-competitive, and I think that what we should do in schools is exactly what is done in other areas, whether it's law firms or hospitals or accounting firms or engineering firms. We ought to set standards, reasonable standards, and say we want teachers who meet the following qualifications.

We shouldn't be unrealistic in thinking that we can have all the talents in the country working in our elementary and secondary schools. We wouldn't want a country where there weren't talented people working in many other fields. But we ought to get our fair share of people, and we should certainly not bring into our field any people who are incompetent or who are below a certain line.

What their salaries should be, once we set those standards, ought to be set by the market. That is, you offer a certain salary, and if you get it, you get enough people who meet the standards that you set, then that is what you ought to pay them.

If you've got too many lined up, salaries will probably move up slowly because there are lots of good people lined up for those jobs. Salaries are not going to
move up.

On the other hand, if what we are offering people does not bring in good people to the standards that we have set and if the standards are reasonable, then we ought to move them up.

I believe that when we are finished viewing all of this from a market point of view, that we will need some additional financial support. Exactly how much I do not know.

Secondly, I would hope that all the presidential candidates would strongly commit themselves to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. There are a whole range of issues involved with this. There is the whole question of paying some teachers more than others. There is the whole question of having a school in which some teachers can have more responsibility than others.

That whole set of issues has always ended up with no change because there was no faith in the local principal or the local school board or whoever was going to make the decision. How do you know that person is really going to pick the people who are really outstanding? How do you know you're not going to have local politics and favoritism?

The creation of a national board gets away from that. It means that a national board not subject to local politics and patronage and, hopefully, not subject to
national politics and patronage either -- that is, a really
independent board -- will be able to certify that some
people are outstanding and schools, therefore, will be able
to use those people both in terms of compensation and in
terms of different rules in the schools without the negative
political consequences that we have faced up to now.

The second important part of that board is that
it will contain an ongoing research arm which will keep
asking the question, "How do we identify people who are
outstanding? What do we mean by outstanding? And how can we
train and educate people in the future to be outstanding so
there will be an ongoing focus on how to do a better job in
terms of teacher education?"

I also think that a good set of assessments of
teaching will bring about major changes in teacher education
which are long overdue, and I think it's very hard to get
these changes in colleges and universities. But if some
colleges and universities find that none of their graduates
are becoming board-certified teachers, this is indeed
something that those colleges and universities will
undoubtedly feel pressure to change, either their selection
processes or the processes of selecting and training that
they have.

Closely related to that is the idea of support
for education as a profession. We want to move more and
more toward involving teachers as a group in making
decisions.

The reason for that I gave a minute ago, and that
is that children are not mechanical objects being moved
through an assembly line. They are very complicated. They
are all different. And the only way to provide for a proper
education is to make individual judgments.

And the only way to get individual judgments is
to have people right there at the front line who are
sophisticated, who can make them. And the reason for
professionalism is exactly that.

It means you get highly educated people who have
been very well trained, and then you allow them, give them
the flexibility to make decisions and judgments which are
appropriate in each case.

Without that, I don't think we are going to go
along a track that is going to put many good people into the
field. You cannot get good people who feel that they are
coming into a system where they are being treated as though
they know nothing and someone else is telling them
everything that they ought to do.

The next important thing that I will look for in
what the candidates say is the commitment to research. As
Secretary Bennett pointed out yesterday, we are about to go
over the $300 billion mark in our expenditures for
education, and the moneys are assigned at the federal level for research and for the national assessment are somewhere around the $15 million mark.

That is an outrage to spend $300 billion and not constantly measure what is it that is going right, what is going wrong, how might we change things, not to have a measure which compares state by state how well we're doing, how well is this state doing now compared to what it did five years ago and ten years ago.

Why do we have to wait every ten years to find out how many of our kids can write a letter or read it or what that improvement is, instead of getting it every three years or four years so that we can make changes more quickly.

A commitment to research, that is not one of these sexy things which is going to find millions of people out there saying, "I won't vote for you unless you support educational research." But we really cannot support improvement in the world of education without finding out what's happening, are we doing better, are we doing worse, what kinds of programs are working and which programs are not working.

In addition to that, we are going to be looking for candidates to make commitments to adding resources with respect to targeted groups, the minorities and the poor.
These groups have made the most progress in the last 15 years. They have had funds targeted in their direction.

Yesterday the Committee on Economic Development came out with an outstanding report -- I was privileged to serve as an adviser to that committee -- in which they pointed out that unless we reach a lot of these youngsters very early with an array of community and educational services, that we are going to continue to have this problem of large numbers of essentially handicapped youngsters because their pregnant teenage mothers didn't get the right nutrition and then we get brain-damaged kids in schools and can do nothing about them; that we have to take these problems seriously, and that is a range of problems that is an appropriate federal concern.

It comes out of previous discrimination, and it also ends up with a federal burden in terms of welfare and a whole bunch of other things. There is no question that there needs to be federal commitment there.

We are also going to be looking not just for money, but for values. I think all of you have seen a project that we have been working on recently dealing with the teaching of democracy.

A recent report by the National Endowment for the Humanities indicates similar problems in terms of what it is that our students know or do not know about our own country,
our Constitution, our Bill of Rights, what other forms of
government there are, what are the alternatives, and that
democracy is not something that you keep and hold onto in
ignorance, it frequently has to be fought for and no one is
going to fight for it if they don't understand it.

That is a job the schools have to do, of charter
development, values and understanding of that by candidates
is extremely important.

I will just wind up by saying that I think this
is going to be a very crucial year for education in a number
of ways. The national commission, the Carnegie Commission,
will start as a regular commission for the first time on
some very basic decisions will be made there. Depending on
which way they go, we will either move toward
professionalism and toward a restructured school, or, if
things don't go right there, we will end up with what we
have had all along -- namely, a school system that is not
working very well.

The presidential candidates and the presidential
debate will provide an opportunity for a national focus on
education, which we have not had for some time.

Third, of course, is the fact that across the
county there are more and more places where very different
things are being done, and it is going to provide an
opportunity for a national discussion of what are the
appropriate changes in our schools -- to what extent are the
things that Dade County has started to do and Rochester and
New York City and Hammond, Toledo, Cincinnati, and New
Haven, Hartford, and a number of other places -- to what
extent will these programs work, to what extent will they
improve education? We believe they will. That will start a
very widespread movement towards similar programs in other
school districts in the country.

Thank you.

MS. SHEKETOFF: I would like to remind everyone
to please identify themselves and their organizations before
they ask any questions.

Are there any questions?

QUESTION: My name is Bob Shoga, with the L.A.
Times. Mr. Shanker, I wonder if you could be a little bit
more specific about the first point. You said some
financial commitment. I understand your reluctance to put
an exact price tag on it. Could you give me some figure?
As you know, the people argue most about in politics is
money and where it comes from. What is the magnitude of it?
How essential is it for there to be an increase in federal
aid? I guess that's what you mean. Could you speak to
that, please?

MR. SHANKER: I think federal aid is only
appropriate for some things. That is, I do not believe that
it is the Federal Government's job to basically support the school districts of our country. That is the state and local responsibility.

I think that there are several federal responsibilities. One is in the area of civil rights. That is that where there are deficiencies in the education of youngsters due to discrimination which came out of — well, it's within our lifetime that we had legal segregation in this country. There is no question that a lot of the educational deficiency goes right back to that.

We now have about $3 billion invested in Chapter 1. That reaches only a small proportion of the youngsters who are eligible. So that you've got to pick and choose.

I would say that all the youngsters who are eligible for the program ought to get it, and therefore that program probably ought to move from $3 billion to cover all kids. It ought to be an entitlement program. That would probably bring it up to about $12 billion.

I may be a little off on that, but I don't think I am very far off. That obviously cannot be done in one shot. You couldn't find the teachers, space, and everything else. But if you have a program, a budget target where you say within a certain number of years you are going to do things, there is no reason why you can't have educational targets to say that this will be done over a period of time.
Second, the responsibility of the Federal Government is research. We have done it in agriculture. We have done it in a lot of other fields, where we know that you are not going to get 15,000 separate local agencies doing it. And that is not expensive, but it probably means moving the $15 million that we now spend to $30 million or $40 million or $50 million -- we are talking about millions here, not billions of dollars.

QUESTION: How much do we now spend? I am sorry.

MR. SHANKER: $15 million. A doubling or a tripling. It's very little. It's ridiculous. We talk about $300 billion expenditures and $15 million to figure out whether you're spending the money wisely. That wouldn't take a huge increase, certainly not in terms of -- well, that's dollars. That's second.

This is that the Federal Government needs to intervene in terms of special problems that are, in a sense, one-shot interventions designed to meet certain types of emergencies.

Now, I would say that probably in the next five or ten years one such emergency will be the number of, let's say, math and science teachers who are qualified that we have in the country. Most of our kids who are in high school now went to elementary school before the wave of reform. Many of them weren't required to take much math or
science. Many of them don't feel very good at it. It's going to take quite a while before the country to produce enough people in math and science for industry and the military and education.

Therefore, I think you need something like what you had in the Talented Teacher Act, which says to future mathematicians and scientists, "We will pay for your college education or we will wipe out your college loans if you will teach for three years or five years before going to work for some company." In other words, some sharing of resources with incentives created by the Federal Government.

States can pick up on programs like this also. Some of them do. Some provide a medical education for people who will provide medical care in rural areas for three, four, five, six years.

There are programs similar to this in a number of field. And I would include in with this last batch, since I think the most important development we have now is moving toward the professionalization of teaching, support for the Carnegie Board. Eventually, the Carnegie Board will be supported by teachers who take the assessments. But for the first three, four, or five years it will need some outside support. These are some of them.

But the biggest one would be the poor and minority youngsters. It would include Chapter 1, early
childhood education, and a battery of services in terms of preventing low-birthweight babies and things like that. That would be the most expensive part of it.

Anyone else? Yes?

QUESTION: Ken Askey, from Scripps-Howard. I don't understand how a national board of standards would solve the merit pay problem. This is a local decision that people have to make at a local level. Your staff is paid on a merit basis. So is mine. Somebody has to make that subjective decision.

MR. SHANKER: The subjective decisions are made on the basis of who is hired and what function they are given in the institution, and there will always be some subjective decisions.

In our proposals, we favor moving away from the classroom as we know it right now. We think that almost every other industry in this country has changed very radically over the last 200 years. Schools have not. The notion of a teacher standing in front of a bunch of youngsters and the youngsters sitting still for five or six hours a day listening to someone talk, with very little use of technology and very little differentiation in staffing is not a very good structure.

However, we feel that a national board can do in this field what it has done in other professional fields.
Look, there are a lot of people who work in accounting, but there is a difference. Most companies of accountants will treat a certified public accountant differently from somebody who can fool around with the numbers but isn't certified.

When you are serious about some medical problem you have, any doctor can treat you, but the chances are you are going to look for a board-certified surgeon or a board-certified allergist or somebody else to do that.

There is no reason why the profession itself shouldn't have a way through a bunch of nationally comprehensive assessments of saying to the public, "Look, the states make the decision as to who gets licensed, the local boards make the decisions as to how much they are going to pay people that we are going to hire, but the profession itself is going to certify to you that the following people are outstanding in the following ways. And then locally you can take that into account in how you structure your schools.

QUESTION: But that is pay by credentials, not by performance.

MR. SHANKER: Well, I think we have that in our society, too. That is why surgeons generally make more than general practitioners and certified public accountants. If you've got a good system of certification, then there is a
relationship between certification and performance.

I think in most other professions the argument would be that a person who is certified is going to be a better performer in that field on average, which is why you look for a certified surgeon, a board-certified surgeon, you don't just go out and say, well, I can do just as well with anybody else in surgery.

Yes?

QUESTION: Emily Feistner, of the National Center for Education Information. You mentioned that the Carnegie Forum about ready to either make or not make some very crucial decisions, and if they do things will be better, if not they will go on as in the past.

Could you be specific about what those are?

MR. SHANKER: Well, it has to determine whether the standards for board certification are going to be set high or low, because there are obviously differences of opinion among the people on there. Some feel that a board-certified person ought to be fairly rare, not too common, ought to meet very high standards. Others feel, gee, that is going to make a lot of people feel bad, so let's have standards so that almost everybody can make it.

There are questions as to whether one has to go through the current system of teacher education to even sit for such a certification or whether anybody can go through
it whether or not they have. The answer to that question will be very important.

I think the question of whether the national board becomes just a coordinating device for 50 different state boards or whether it actually does certification on its own will be very important. I think if you have 50 totally different standards in the 50 states, you are going to not end up accomplishing very much.

So I think those are some of the key questions. There are others. But if you end up with 50 different states and you end up with relatively low standards and if you also end up with -- well, in other words, if we end up with almost everybody being certified as being outstanding, the whole thing is going to look silly. And indeed, it will be.
I think there are several other problems in the process. One is the Board is going to have to very delicately balance several things. There is a desire on the part of some not to have anyone certified until you have developed a perfect certifying instrument. That could take ages. You would have another generation of people or maybe two generations sitting here at a press conference waiting for the assessments.

On the other hand, there could be a rush to put things out quickly, which don't have very much credibility.

So I think to a large extent, the credibility of the enterprise will rest on being able to reduce assessments fairly quickly within a couple of years that are better than anything that now exists, but that aren't perfect.

We are not waiting for perfection, but to be able to produce something that's, let's say, far better than anything like the NTE or any of the other exams that are available now.

MR. BARRETT: Larry Barrett of "Time" magazine. You have doubtless been paying attention to what several presidential candidates have been paying already. They are all talking about education in one way or another.

Which of them strike you as making a lot of sense and which of them strike you as making nonsense?

MR. SHANKER: I wouldn't put any of them in
either of those categories right now. I don't think that any of them as yet have taken very specific positions. They kind of all think education is important and that teachers are good people and they ought to be helped and supported. All that is very nice, but it is not a program, and I have not yet seen any programs.

I think it is very important that presidential candidates, as soon as possible, take on some of the tough issues and some of the tough issues are issues of saying that we need a national board, we need to move toward professionalism, we need staff differentiation, we have to find ways of using technology in schools which are not being used.

Who says the only way a person can learn is by listening to somebody talk all day long? I mean, can't kids learn by watching a VCR, listening to an audiotape? They can learn from other kids. They can learn by reading. They can learn from simulations. They can use computer instruction.

You know, there are all sorts of ways of learning.

And to say that the way we are going to do it is the way we always did it before there was any other technology, and that is to have the student sit there and listen to somebody talk when we know that the rate of
failure is very great in this, that lots of kids just cannot sit still, keep quiet and learn by listening to someone talk. Many of them could learn in other ways. It is just wrong.

So I think it is very important for presidential candidates to indicate that they will support and do something to help to bring about a school which is a school for the next century and not just assume that the school that was okay for the 19th century and continues through the 20th is all right.

We have also learned a lot in our industry about different styles of management. If you look at what is happening in corporations today in this country, in terms of the relationship of management, the workers, what is expected of employees, in terms of participation, in terms of contributing to the quality of the product, I don't see any reason why that same philosophy shouldn't be brought over to the schools. I don't see any of that yet.

MR. BARRETT: Well, several of them have been talking of lengthening the school year, making the comparisons between the U.S. and Japan and the U.S. and certain other countries. Several of them are stressing accountability, I guess somewhat in the vein of Bennett here yesterday.

Do you think lengthening the school year is a
Mr. Shanker: It might be, but if you keep well, look, if we're not doing very well in the way we are doing it, doing more of not doing very well isn't very good.

The big problem is not the length of the school year. It is how much time the kid pays attention, and if a kid is tuned out all year long now, which a lot of them are, and that is what the National Assessment figures show, it shows that maybe the majority of students are not listening, are not engaged. They are attending, but they are not getting anything out of it.

Lengthening of the school year will give you another week or two weeks or three weeks a month of not listening and not doing anything.

Now it is true that the minority of kids who are listening and paying attention, I believe will learn more, assuming that a kid who is not doing that, if you lengthen the year for that kid, that kid is going to continue to be engaged. He may decide not to be. He may decide that's when he goes to Boy Scout camp or does something else and may tune out for part of it. But that is very mechanical. That is something like saying, hey, the way we make a better automobile than the Japanese make is to get all the auto workers to work an extra half hour a day.

I haven't heard anybody say that. I have heard
them say that you got to put quality in there. You've got
to have a different mode of production. You have to have
leaner management. You have to have employees who care
about quality. You maybe have to have some of what an
employee is paid, based on the profits that the company
makes. You have to provide incentives within the system,
which is accountability systems.

And also, I hear a lot of talk in business about
how we are not doing so well, because we worry about the
quarterly bottom line.

I think we've got to worry about that in
education too. That is, the Japanese worker and manager
knows he is going to be in the same company ten to twenty
years from now, and if that company goes down, he is
unlikely to get employed anywhere else. That is a very
strong incentive for making that company work, and if the
company looks like it is going down or he is spending
weekends, nights, summers, every extra minute figuring out
how to make the company succeed, if he is just worried about
a move to the next corporation in the next quarter, if they
show a great bottom line, you don't care about what your
company is going to be doing, one, three to five years from
now.

So I think we need accountability measures, which
is why I favor more money for national research. A large
part of the research would be gathering information as to what works and what doesn't. Are we doing better? Are we doing worse? Once you have that information, we have to start asking what kind of incentives do you build in to get the better models adopted by those who don't have those better models.

But I don't have very much faith in the notion that all you have to do is add a little time, you know, some mechanical fix-it is going to work it.

If 80 percent of your kids who are in high school are not learning to write a decent letter, I'll tell you one of the reasons for that. One of the reasons is that, if you've got 30 kids in a class, five periods a day, you've got 150 papers to mark, if you give the kids an assignment, and it takes you five minutes to mark it, five minutes to sit with each kid and suggest how he might rewrite, that is 30 hours.

If you can't figure out some way of reorganizing the school to make it possible for kids to write two, three, four or five times a week some substantial paper and have an adult read it and talk to the kid about it without creating an absolutely impossible burden, you can add another four weeks onto the school year, where kids won't write and nobody is going to read their papers, and they still won't learn how to write.
So I think that sort of proposal -- add a little more onto the day, add a little more onto the year, require the student to do this. Now in Japan, you have a very different set of factors, as you know. You have mothers who spend their entire lives bringing up their kids. You have mothers who get the same books and the same homework that the kids do, and they do it together. If a child is ill, the mother goes to school and takes the notes and comes home and teaches the youngster.

There is competition to get into the schools at the age of 3 and into schools that prepare you for the schools that are there at 3 before that.

I don't think we are about to change the American culture to do that. That doesn't meant that we have to be losers, but it means that we have to make our improvements, in accordance with the American character, not in accordance with the characteristics of another people.

QUESTION: The kids in Chicago are having a shorter school year. The teachers are out. What are the issues there? Are you playing an role?

MR. SHANKER: The issue there is a shorter school year, isn't it, that the board is trying to impose in order to save money. That's a money issue, mostly. As you know, the governor had asked for a tax increase in order to
provide increased aid to education. Illinois school
districts are very heavily dependent on state aid for school
support. The legislature did not support that increase. I
don't know what the economics of the district are, but
Chicago is claiming they don't have money and that,
therefore, they want to close schools a few days and cut
teachers' salaries back to reflect the reduction in the
number of days worked. And the teachers are on strike for a
salary increase.

QUESTION: Are you planning to go there or
playing any role in this?

MR. SHANKER: I will go there if they ask me to.
I mean, basically, the national organization doesn't conduct
strikes. If they need research, advice as to tax base and
things like that, we have people -- for instance, we do have
people in Detroit right now. There are some differences as
to what's available in the budget. We do that, but our
locals are perfectly capable of conducting it.

QUESTION: But as you are here this morning,
around the country, constantly talking about teacher
professionalism, and you talk about the profession, does it
worry you to see the big headlines that the teachers are out
in Chicago, as they were out in L.A.?

MR. SHANKER: Well, sometimes you have no choice.
I mean, suppose -- I can tell you, if the teachers in
Chicago, just remember, this is not the first time they've been out, and each time they've been out, the school board said they had no money, and after the teachers went out, the school board miraculously found some money. Both teachers' salaries and conditions today would be much worse in Chicago, if the teachers had merely accepted what the board tried to impose on them each of those times.

I don't like it. I think kids do lose when they are not in school. I think teachers lose, in terms of what the public thinks of them when they go out on strike, and that is a price which, in a democratic society, is a touch price, when you are trying to get the public to support public education and negative feelings are created by this, but I think that the alternative, which is to accept constant deterioration, is also not an acceptable one.

So I wish that they were able to solve it without striking, but they clearly were not able to.

QUESTION: What is the general trend on strikes this fall around the country, Mr. Shanker? Do you have any feel for it?

QUESTION: This is the smallest number that we have had in years. It has been going down every year. The high point was the late '60s and early '70s. And those were essentially strikes for collective bargaining recognition and first contracts, salaries and working conditions, kind
of labor and management figuring out who was stronger. It was first experienced. Then there was a settling down. Then in the mid-'70s, where all these financial crises, the bankruptcy in New York City and Chicago nearly came to the edge of that and other cities, and you had a bunch of defensive strikes where management was cutting back because of their bankruptcy and other fiscal problems, and the unions went out to try to hold onto what they had.

But since the reform movement, I would say, since about 1980, the number of strikes has dwindled. When you consider the fact that there are 15,000 school districts in the country and there are probably about 50 on strike, most of them are very small districts. So it is a very, very small percentage of the total workforce, and of course, if the strikes don't last very long, it is possible to make up the time.

By the way, the Chicago School System chose in these previous strikes not to have the kids make up the time, because many of these school boards use the strike as a way of balancing their budget. Obviously, teachers don't get paid when they are out on strike.

You know, a strike is not the same kind of a weapon in the public sector as it is in the private company. If the employees shut the company down, both sides lose.
The workers lose their salaries and the manufacturer loses the value of the product, but when you strike a school system, the teachers are losing pay and the board of education is saving money. So that may be the reason for the strike there, maybe that the board of education has figured that that is the way to balance its budget.

That is kind of a way of closing the schools down and not providing education for the kids and blaming it on the teachers and their union.

QUESTION: Al, do you think that the increase in teacher pay that has taken a phenomenal increase in the last couple of years is going to take care of the teacher shortage that the unions have been so concerned about?

MR. SHANKER: It takes care of some of it. We find there are quite a few people coming into teaching now who started in other fields and who now want to teach, and we find that in most of our cities, that's a very interesting phenomenon of people who are 30 or 40 or 45 years old, second careers. It is partly the money and partly the feeling that things are going to get better, that governors are talking about it, and business people are talking about it. And for four or five years, salaries have improved, but we need to remember that we've just reached the point this year where we have now, in terms of purchasing power, we've just surpassed the previous high
point of 1973.

So we've had these ups and downs, you know.

I noticed that Secretary Bennett talked about the big increase in teachers' salaries since 1960. What he didn't talk about is what happened to teachers in the 1940s and '50s. When everybody else was getting raises, teachers pretty much stood still.

I don't want to pick a year that is favorable to us or unfavorable, but unfortunately, we have periods when you kind of stand still, and then there are big periods of catch up.

But I think it has been helpful. I do not believe that these increases and improvements will end the shortage in certain areas, where there is an overall national shortage.

So there has to be sharing in those areas.

Secondly, I think that, basically our standards for admitting people into teaching in most states, is far too low. As far as I know, it has not changed in most places. To be an elementary school teacher, all you need to do is get a 65 percent on the same examination that you are going to be giving your students when you start teaching there.

I think a 65 percent on an elementary school examination for a teacher is an indefensibly low standard.
The teachers have to be far ahead of the students, if they are to be good teachers.

QUESTION: Did you write Bennett's speech yesterday, of the NEA passages?

MR. SHANKER: No, I did not write the NEA passages. I both agree and disagree with him on the NEA passages. That is, I do think that the NEA has been an obstacle to many reforms, but not everything that Bill Bennett thinks is a good reform is, indeed, a good reform.

Bill Bennett tends to be of the push-button school of reform, that mechanical things, in his view, will make a big difference. I agree with some of the reforms and not with others. For instance, we accepted the idea of retesting teachers in Texas, not because we like the idea of retesting somebody who has been teaching for 20 years, but it was part of an overall reform package, and sometimes you have to make a deal on a package or you lose the whole thing. But I also do not believe -- I think the Secretary doesn't come with clean hands on this whole thing.

I think if you want to bring about -- there is no way you are going to bring about basic and important reforms in schools without getting the acceptance of the people who are part of the process. The SATURN project in General Motors, about the acceptance of the United Auto Workers, they have a pay schedule which was lower than that of the
average auto worker. They had the employees work in teams and share the profits, so they had the chance of making more money than any other auto worker, but their base pay was low.

That was worked out, it was voted on, and it was accepted by the employees, and I hope it turns out to be a great success. It would not be a great success, if it were imposed from above on a bunch of reluctant employees, who felt that they were being done in.

Unfortunately, Bill Bennett doesn't seem to understand that if you have a good idea, you don't just pass a law and shove it down the throats of the people who are going to have to carry it out. If you've got a good idea, it ought to be good enough, so you can sit with the people involved and convince them that it is in their interest and it is in the public interest and they ought to do it and make them feel good about it, so that they will help make it work.

I am kind of surprised that somebody would have discovered a philosophy like Bill Bennett, thinking you can get improvements by legislating them through regulations from above.

MS. SHEKETOFF: That seems to be all the questions.

Thank you very much.
(Whereupon, at 9:50 a.m., the press conference was concluded.)