"STATE OF OUR UNION"

by

ALBERT SHANKER

President of American

Federation of Teachers

AFL-CIO

PRESIDENT SHANKER:  Thank you very much, Joan-Marie. It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to review some of the things that we have done over the last two years, some of the things that have happened to our schools, to our country, to our union. Since we last met two years ago, just kind of looking back and thinking of some of the major things, some of the events that I was involved in, some that all of us were, some involving the whole country, I guess the first thing to see is that the education issue hasn't gone away. It's still a major concern to the American people and the American business community.

Over the last two years, a number of locals in the American Federation of Teachers, an increasing number of locals, have made major strides in terms of bringing about reforms and restructuring within their school systems. And some of the
changes that these locals are involved in are so radical, so
different from what has gone on before, that almost all of us
have had the opportunity to read about them, not just in the
publications of the AFT, but in national news magazines, newspa-
papers, and we've seen reports on television and heard about
them on the radio.

And I must say that almost everyone of these major
efforts to transform our schools is an effort of a local of the
American Federation of Teachers, and locals that enjoy very
strong collective bargaining relationships.

(Applause)

PRESIDENT SHANKER: We've been involved over this
period of time in an interesting legal suit where in St. Louis
the Superintendent of Schools has decided to fire teachers and
evaluate them largely on one item, and that is on the test
scores of students; a very important issue in terms of the
meaning of professionalism.

Many of you last year attended what was probably
the greatest educational conference in the United States, a
Quest conference that would have been as big as this convention
if we'd had enough hotel space. And during the last two years
tens of thousands of teachers across the country, including
many in districts represented by the National Education Association, have brought in our programs on educational research and dissemination, critical thinking, and other areas, fields in which we've shown leadership.

During this period of time we also issued a very important document, a statement on the need to have our schools and our teachers involved in the teaching of the meaning of democracy. And we obtained the signatures of support from about 200 citizens across the country. I'm happy to say that your state superintendent Bill Honig was not only a signer, but has actually--this state has contributed funds to the ongoing development of textbooks, materials, the training of teachers, and has had groups working in this state to see to it that the curriculum of the state carries out the important mandate set forth there; an extremely important issue, because after all, why do the American people, even those without children, pay for our schools and the education of our children, if not for at least one thing, and that is, to maintain an understanding and a belief and a faith in our system of government.

During this period of time there was an important report by the committee on economic development. I had the privilege of serving as an adviser to that committee. An
extremely important report, a major national business group, that went beyond the report that it had previously issued in support of educational reform, and started talking about issues like the tens of thousands, indeed millions of children, who will be coming into our schools with terrible handicaps and brain damage and retardation unless we provide adequate medical care and nourishment for pregnant mothers.

And for the first time in the history of American business, major leaders of corporations testifying before Congress for major increases in funds.

We also saw some important cases like the so-called Scopes II case in Tennessee, and another case in Alabama, dealing with the issues of textbooks and religious issues, cases which showed up the shortcomings of many of our textbooks, but which fortunately did not support the position of some of the extreme groups that were involved in those cases.

Only a few months ago I had the great privilege of representing Lane Kirkland in a march in Warsaw, Poland, the first illegal march by Solidarity since the declaration of marshal law. And we continue in our support of that great, courageous and brave union.

(Applause)
PRESIDENT SHANKER: And some months before that, last October, together with world leaders of other public employee unions, I went to Chile and spent some time there. And we have sent some of our leaders down there to work with the teachers union. We'll be hearing more about that during our convention.

But this union and the AFL-CIO, and the National Endowment for Democracy, and the International Federation of Free Teachers Unions, is playing a major role in the referendum that's about to take place in Chile, where we are involved in voter registration and campaigning in the hopes that we will be able to oust the Pinochet regime and restore democracy in that country.

(Applause)

PRESIDENT SHANKER: During this two-year period of time, we have new tax legislation in Washington. And very few of our members know it, but one of the most important things that we did during that tax fight was to make sure that the deductibility of state and local taxes remained; and that is now a $40 billion form of assistance to schools and to public employees and to other public services at the state and local level.
And we saw the creation of the national board transformed from the Carnegie Board, something that started with some ideas that we put out there. They were transformed and modified, but as Bill Honig pointed out, we have great hope for what that will do for teacher professionalism in the future.

And just a few weeks ago I was invited by Jimmy Carter and Jerry Ford to go to Atlanta to meet with 100 business leaders to deal with the future of education and the economy.

I've been over the past two years to dozens of meetings of boards of directors of corporations to talk about the needs of our schools; meeting with governors, state legislatures. It has been a very exciting, very productive two years, a period during which the American Federation of Teachers, because of the policies that you adopted in convention two years ago, has been in editorials, in articles, has been recognized as being in the leadership, in the forefront, of bringing about change in our schools.

Now, I would think that the first thing we should go back to and look at is what Bob Porter pointed out to us just a few minutes ago. When I joined the AFT in 1952, the American Federation of Teachers, after 42 years of existence, had 50,000 members nationally. In the last two years we gained
55,000 members, more than we gained in the first 42 years of our existence. And that's more than organizing 55,000 members. Because you know, these are--this is growth. In addition to growth we constantly have to sign up people to make up for those who retire, those who leave, those who move out of teaching, those who pass away. There are about 70,000 a year who move out of the union. So in order to stand still we've got to organize 70,000 people a year.

To show a growth of 55,000 means that all of you and your building reps actually signed up 200,000 members over the last two years: quite an accomplishment.

(Applause)

PRESIDENT SHANKER: We expect to continue to recognize those involved in the great organizing effort. You saw quite a large number stand with their golden apples.

Within your locals, many of you still have large numbers of people who are not in the union. We're working for them, we're negotiating their salaries, we're taking their grievances, we're representing them in Washington and in the state capitol, we're doing all sorts of things, but they have not yet decided to join.

What these local leaders have found out is that if
you keep working at it, keep asking, keep trying, you can get them. And we can make very great progress. And I want to congratulate the winners.

The new growth is terrific, and we're going to continue traditional organizing. But one of the very key issues is growing in many different ways, and I'd like to address at this time something which was adopted in convention two years ago, and that is, we modified our constitution. We had extensive debate. And we decided to put in our constitution a new form of membership called associate member.

Now we understand that associate members are not voting members. And they're not members in the same sense that we are, or the members in our schools.

But we also discussed at that time the fact that there are many people who would like to be associated with us. And if we signed up 100, 200, 300, 500, 700,000 people like that, so that in addition to our 670,000 members, let's say we had another 670,000 associate members, the President of the United States, governors and members of Congress, they won't say, well, you've got all these different kinds of members. They would know that we would have 1.2 or 1.3 or 1.4 million members.
And while we're not ceasing our efforts at growing in the regular ways, we ought to, at the same time, devote efforts to bringing in associates.

Now in your kits are materials on associate membership. There's a flyer. There's an envelope. There's a sign-up card.

We hope that in addition to that one sample, back out there somewhere there are tables with these; that you will take them with you. Because if each and everyone of our members would sign up one other person--now, these might be people who used to be in our local but they're no longer teachers, but they'd still like to get the American Educator and the American Teacher and be eligible for our insurance and have travel discounts and get our credit card and do all these things for $25 a year and still be counted as a member.

They might have moved to another district where there's no AFT local. And until there is one, they could maintain their relationship this way.

We're moving on the retiree membership, which is a form of this. And then we just want to expand what we call the friends of education. Friends, relatives, people that you know in church or clubs or anywhere else, if each and everyone of our
members carries around one or two of these, and next year as we come in with not only 30,000 or 40,000 regular members that are in collective bargaining units or moving for collective bargaining, but also bringing in tens and indeed hundreds of thousands of associate members, our influence with the Congress, our influence with the next and forthcoming administration, will be multiplied and will move that much faster.

This is one of the very, very high priorities of the union. We'll get to a million the regular way. We'll get to a million and a half. We may get to two or more eventually. But you see that organizing 33 or 25 or 30,000 members is very hard. We're going to continue doing that.

But we can move up to that 1-1/2 or 2 million mark much faster if we make this a priority, and we intend to do that.

Now you see that our growth is in all areas. And the backdrops that we have indicates that our union is made up of a number of different constituencies. We started, and our largest single group of course is still classroom teachers.

But over the last year we have recognized the number of different groups in our union in different ways. For example, we have a special committee of the executive council
that's considering types of restructuring for the organization so that these other groups that are with us here today and that have shown such tremendous growth, we're thinking of new structures and new ways of providing for increased participation for each of these groups.

Now while we have a number of different groups, there is a commonality of interest. And that can be seen in the fact that we're all going to be working together at getting a new administration in Washington, D.C., one that cares about education and health care and public services, because all of these things go together.

The $40 billion that we manage to keep there as tax deductible helped not only schools but state and local public services and health care as well.

We will have a number of speakers at this convention. And I am sure that we will find everyone of them making a great contribution to our understanding.

Let these speakers come to us, and we've selected them in such a way, that they touch upon the priorities of each and everyone of our groups.

William Julius Wilson, a brilliant black scholar at the University of Chicago who has written a great book called
The Truly Disadvantaged, which shows the problems that our schools and other agencies are faced with as a result of poverty and urban decay and the rise, the growth of the underclass.

Marian Wright Edelman at our civil rights luncheon, really a person who single-handedly has raised the money and has taken nationally the issues of teenage pregnancy and neglect of children through the Children's Defense Fund.

Tom Donahue, who is Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, has led the committee on the future of work; restructuring, improving the AFL-CIO so that it can grow and be more effective than it has in the past.

Dr. Paul Starr, a Pulitzer Prize winning author on how medicine became a profession, and the history of the medical profession, will be here to talk to us on an issue that affects teachers but affects all public employees, the issue of privatization, the view that government workers are lazy, that government can't get it done, all you've got to do is sell everything that's now done by the government and have some private contractor do it and it will be done better. This is now his area of concentration, and while his address will undoubtedly focus on many areas of local and state government, its impact on vouchers and tuition tax credits is very clear as
well.

And then Admiral Watkins, who is head of the AIDS Commission, will be here to talk on that issue, which of course is not only an issue affecting our health care people, but all of us.

Now I would like to touch on some of the accomplishments of the other groups, the non-teacher groups, who are here and who are such an important and strong part of our union.

FNHP, health care. This is the 10th birthday, happy 10th birthday for that group in terms of its affiliation with the American Federation of Teachers.

(Applause)

Over that period of time, it has grown from 11 to 63 locals, representing over 40,000 employees, not only registered nurses, who are important, but also, LPNs, medical technicians, physical and occupational therapists, pharmacists, laboratory and other technicians.

And recently we have begun taking in and are quite successful in bringing in doctors and dentists. And we are now talking to quite a number of doctors and dentists who believe that this is the union for them.

So when we get back here two years from now, don't
be surprised. You may be able to turn to the person next to you and get some free advice.

We've had a very good record in the health care field. They are tough employers. They hire anti-union firms to figure out how to keep the union out. In spite of that we have won two-thirds of all the collective bargaining elections that we have gone into; a terrific record. (APPLAUSE)

And this is another area in which each and every one of you can help the union grow. If you know people who are in this field, people in the hospital near you, or in your locality. Think not only of organizing teachers, and not only of associate members, but think of people in the health care field down the road. Most of them are unorganized in this country, and it's a great potential for growth for the American Federation of Teachers.

We have also shown significant growth in our federation of state employees, which includes state and local employees. We have organized in that field an outreach program, and for the most part we are bringing in entire state and local organizations, organizations that have been there for some time, but have not been within the AFL-CIO or any of its affiliated unions.

We bring these groups in and we have an annual
budget briefing to tie in the relationship between the Federal budget and what's about to happen to them at the state and local level.

We had a national conference on privatization. We brought experts in from across the country to familiarize our own members with the kinds of problems they'll be facing, the kinds of arguments they'll be facing, and how to handle these arguments.

We have research and training operations in this area which are separated from our teacher research and training operations; and we have widespread cooperation with a number of organizations that are still independent in the hopes that by working with them and they with us that they will follow many of their colleagues and affiliate.

Two years ago we announced the affiliation of the Illinois State Employees Association. And now we have with us as new affiliates the Indiana State Employees Association; the Kansas Association of Public Employees; the Kentucky State Employees Association. And just the other day our executive council approved the affiliation of the largest chapter of the North Dakota Employees Association.

I want you to welcome them to our ranks. They are
all here.

(Applause)

Now, our fastest growing group are the paraprofessionals and school-related personnel.

(Applause)

In the last two years we have organized more than 15,000 in this particular group, and their annual conferences are beginning to look something like an AFT convention in both size and enthusiasm.

Now, with our thrust towards reforming and restructuring schools, paras and school-related personnel are included in all of our plans for involvement of employees and in many cases, we're developing career ladders so that those employees who wish to move to other categories in the school system can do so.

But in talking about school, we've got to remember, that school is, yes, it's teachers and it's students. But when it comes to problems, well, discipline is just as much a problem for the bus driver as for the teacher. A good school food program in terms of nutrition for many of these kids is the only decent meal they get during the day, and without that their education would suffer.

And we know the importance of school secretaries,
custodians, and others. So to have them all in the same union and working for the same goals is very, very important.

Now, it's very interesting that about five years ago when we started organizing these groups, the NEA used to put out fliers saying that the AFT is going to become an organization that is not really professional, because it's taking all these other groups in. They had posters; they had fliers; they were pretty vicious, saying that somehow we will lower our standards by taking other people in.

They put those fliers out for a number of years, but it's interesting that the NEA is now growing as an organization, and they're growing by starting to do what we started all those years ago.

So once again, we welcome them to the club in terms of following our leadership in this area. So we face stiff competition, but both organizations are doing this.

I would like to, at this point, this growth is something which all of you have been involved in. It obviously can't be done by essential staff, essential headquarters. But it does take coordination. It takes materials. It takes judgment and targeting assistance and funds.

And I want to at this time thank all of you for
what you've done in this growth. I want to thank our staff. But
I especially want to thank the person who is the greatest
organizing director in the entire labor movement, our own
Phil Kugler, without whom this progress would not have
happened.

(Applause)

The main issue that our union has been involved in,
if you ask any reporter or any educator over the last couple
of years, has been the issue of changing schools. Two years
ago, as I indicated before, we adopted a very radical document
called "The Revolution That Is Overdue".

And if you read it today, you'll find that it still
is revolutionary. And while we adopted it, and in some places
we're carrying it out, it changes very slow, and it's very very
difficult to bring about.

And so I want to devote the remainder of my remarks
to the issue of bringing about change in our schools, and what
the union's role is, and what our next step ought to be.

Five years ago, when A Nation At Risk was pub-
ished, the American Federation of Teachers took a position
quite different from most other groups in the field of
education; not that we agreed with the critics, not that we
thought they were so accurate in their reports or in their criticism or in their advice. But we did feel that there were some real problems out there, and that if we did not show a willingness to cooperate in change, that the American people would get fed up with their public schools and would start moving in the direction of private schools.

We saw the polls where each year the parents were giving the schools worse and worse marks. And I would like to say that the problems and dangers we saw then have not gone away.

And as we talk about changing schools, this is not an academic issue. It's not just a hobbyhorse that I have that's nice to hear every year or once every two years. It remains a life and death issue for American public education, for our profession and for our union.

The polls on what the public thinks of us are still down. The public does not think that there's very much improvement in the schools.

There is still talk about tuition tax credit and vouchers, and more than just talk about these things. Now of course we face all kinds of outside problems. I found that there was something rather obscene about Bill Bennett getting up every
couple of months and criticizing all of us for the poor performance of the schools when he was part of an Administration that threw millions of children into poverty; that resulted in hundreds of thousands not getting enough health care before they were born so that they come to us so damaged that there's very little schools can do for them; they've thrown hundreds of thousands into the streets so that they're homeless; part of an Administration that has created such problems for so many of these kids, policies that have shut down so many jobs in this country that used to be good middle class fine blue collar jobs that would enable a family to get along, and have thrown these people into poverty jobs, or many of them into extensive periods of unemployment. To have somebody like that stand up and blame us for not having these kids read Shakespeare or James Madison is something that's quite obscene--

(Applause)

--about being part of an Administration that creates tremendous problems and then blames somebody else for not handling them.

But in the long run we can't just stand up and blame other people even if they deserve it. We can blame them. But in the long run the public will only support public schools
if the schools do better.

We cannot overcome all the problems. But I think that when we look at what's happening now and how we're doing, I think we'll all agree that we can do a lot better.

Now the first thing we need to recognize is that the threat has not gone away; it's still there. Now, it's hard to convince our members, and it may even be hard to convince ourselves in this room, about how big that threat is.

There are some threats that you can see, they're right in front of you. In the Congress someone introduces a tuition tax credit bill. Immediately we get the word out. The newspapers have it; the television has it; there is a debate. Everyone gets unified and gets into the fight because you can see the threat; it's right there in front of you. It's big; it's national; it's tangible. And we're very good at responding to that sort of threat.

But there are other threats that are there but they're not obvious. They're creeping. They're slow. It's like the people in the auto industry who went to Japan and saw in the 1960s that they were making better cars than we were; cars that were cheaper. They saw it. But it didn't all happen in one day. The American people didn't go out and, you know,
pour kerosene on their cars and burn them up and go out and replace them with Japanese cars. It didn't happen that way.

If something like that had happened, maybe the American auto industry would have been so shaken up that it would have done something very quickly. But what happened was that the first year people bought another 20-, 30-, 40,000 Japanese cars. The next year they bought another 50,000. The next year another bunch. So that each year the American auto industry lost a percentage, and they started laying off a certain number of workers the first year, and some more the second year, and some more the third.

Now that you look at it, and if you look at a graph over the last 10 or 15 or 20 years, it's very clear what's happening. It's an industry that may die. We may have none. But the industry was unable in the early days to mobilize itself because there wasn't enough of an instant, immediate threat of death. It was death by stages, death by percentages, death a little bit at a time, on the installment plan.

Well, that's sort of what's happening to us if you look around. In the last two years, Iowa--the State of Iowa passed a tuition tax credit bill. Now, of course, not all people have rushed to take their children out. But it's there
and it's starting to be used.

By the way it was supported by the NEA in the state because the tax credits were attached to their salary increase in the same piece of legislation. So the teachers had to face the problem that if they opposed the tuition tax credit bill, they were also opposing the bill which contained their salary increases. And they chose to support them because they were interested in the salaries, and somehow weren't frightened enough of the tax credits.

The State of Wisconsin this year introduced their voucher bill which passed one house; was strongly supported by the governor; may pass the next time that legislature meets.

The State of Minnesota has introduced an individual statewide choice plan. It's in the public sector, but it could be expanded to the private sector. And that choice plan, which allows individual families to move their kids from school district to school district may very well mean that some of the kids who are learning will be moved out of schools that have some problems, and it may result in some districts being filled with kids who are concentrated in the underclass and create huge problems, because in many of those schools the learning models that help to keep the teachers in the school
and are role models for other students may very well just move out, resulting in a horrible situation of increased segregation and isolation. That's a threat.

New Jersey has passed an educational bankruptcy law which says that if the state education department, in accordance with certain standards, believes that your school system is educationally bankrupt, the state has a right to come in and put in trustees and take it over so that your school board and superintendent are removed. Some of us might not mind that. But the question is, what comes in its place? And what comes in its place, who are they responsible to? What are they going to do? Do they have to live up to any of the contractual or legal or other agreements that are in place? What happens?

Well, there is the first move now to take over an urban district in the state of New Jersey. And even though at times we would like to remove superintendents of school boards and at times they ought to be, there is no clear indication that a state board of education knows how to run local school districts any better than local people do. There is no magic answer here.

But it does represent a great threat certainly to our contractual relationship.
City of Chicago, Illinois legislature, has been toying with the idea--fortunately, I think killed for this year--of carving up the city school district into a large number of districts; dismissing all the current staff--all the current staff--and not giving them any guarantee of reemployment in the new districts. They would have to be hired and be employed on the basis of whether the new governing boards or school boards in these districts want them.

Now it took a lot of effort to modify that and to defeat the worst provisions of it. But that is not going away forever.

There is one other threat that's out there, and you'll be hearing more and more about it. And that's what's happened in England over the last couple of years. The parliament in England abolished collective bargaining for teachers several years ago, something the teachers there have had much longer than we've had in the United States.

Abolished it; the next thing they did--and that's about to go into effect. This is legislation which has passed. And that is this. They've passed legislation that says that if 20 percent of the parents in any school, parents of children in any school, vote, they sign a petition, they can call for an
election of the parents of the children in the school to
determine whether or not the majority of those parents wish
to remove that school from the jurisdiction of the board of
education and to run that school by a committee elected by the
parents.

Now, it's something like collective bargaining for
parents. They sign a petition; then they get a secret ballot
election. If a majority voting in the secret ballot election
decide they want their own school, they run the school. They
have a right to hire and fire.

In order to make sure that the parents run it
properly, they have instituted a system of national examinations
and a national curriculum which will tell all teachers in all
schools exactly what they have to teach so that their kids can
do well at the end of the year.

Now you may say, well, that's England, and it's
not going to happen here. Well, what happens here frequently
moves over there, and what happens there frequently moves here.
On television a number of months ago I was watching C-SPAN and
saw the Republican National Governors Conference. And there were
three or four governors who got up and made speeches about
Margaret Thatchers wonderful reforms, and about how those reforms
ought to become the basis of the Republican Party's platform for education in the United States.

Now it might not happen this presidential election, but it's something to watch for, and it's something to worry about. Great Britain is not known as a radical nation. There is a very conservative prime minister doing something very radical and something that turned out to be, at least according to the polls, very popular over there.

I believe that we are in a situation that is something like the auto people in the 1960s. They were able to see what the Japanese were doing, and they knew it was a threat. But somehow, they weren't able to mobilize the industry or the union or the other people fast enough to be able to make a better and a cheaper car.

Not until more recently, when it became obvious that they were going to go out of business completely, did they start working on things like the Saturn Project and other things.

I think that's very much the position we are in. And I hope that when you return to your locals and your colleagues I hope that you will share these things with them. Because in 10 or 12 years, or maybe in even less time than that, we may not
just have Iowa with tuition tax credits. We may have five or six states. And we may not just have one state considering vouchers, but a few with them. We may have choice plans which are destructive of many of our urban school districts in more than one state. We may have these bankruptcy plans, and we may have these what are called opt-out plans in England where schools can opt out of the regular public school system and become sort of government financed private schools.

   It won't happen all across the country at once. It won't happen in every state at once. Not all parents will take their children out at once. It will all be slow and easy.

   And precisely because it's slow and easy, unless we go back and warn and educate and inform our own members we won't do very much about it. Nobody's going to be very motivated to do very much about improving or changing schools if we think nothing's about to happen. Everything's okay; nothing's changing.

   Well, things are changing. There are these terrible indicators. We should not wait until it's too late. The time to start doing something is now.

   Now the reasons--so the danger is there and it's
very great. And it's more dangerous because it's slow and
creeping and incremental and not visible, and because you will,
when you start saying these things to teachers, they're going to
look at you the way people look at me a lot of these places:
What are you so worried about? Everything was okay this year.
We got a good state aid package, and we got a good contract.

I can assure you that we do have a representative
of our British affiliate of the IFPTU here, and I hope that
many of you will have an opportunity to talk with him and see
really how unexpected—I'm sure that there was no one in England
who five years ago, if you said five years from now the parents
will be able to vote to take their school out and fire anybody
they want and there'll be a national curriculum, they say, you
go off to the looney bin; you're crazy. It would have been
viewed as insanity.

It's there. So let's take it seriously, and let's
spread the word.

Now, is this feeling that schools aren't doing so
well, is this just a bunch of enemies of education who are
spreading the word? Or are there reasons?

Are there good reasons? What indeed are the schools
like?
Now, I've had some problem with this. Because I've been going around the country talking about some of the results. And I have been saying, and I'm saying here today, that any reasonable person looking over the results would say that we are only educating—the school system of this country, public schools of this country—are only bringing to a level, fairly modest level of education, I'm not talking about some high intellectual standard, and we'll get to the standards in just a minute, a very small proportion of the youngsters who go to school. Very small; shockingly small.

I've been criticized for saying that. I've been criticized by the NEA, for instance, who say, Al Shanker, he should be saying good things about the schools, and instead, look what he's saying. He's talking against teachers, and he's giving us very bad public relations.

But it's not just the NEA. Some of you have written me letters. And some of you have sort of button holed me and said, Al, when you say that, it's bad PR; it doesn't look good. And some have said, gee, that's not what my district is like. We're doing really great in my district. I don't see the kind of results that you're talking about there.

So I would like to talk about why I say this, and
then share with you, and for some of you, share for a second
or third time, what some of these indicators are.

People come up and say, gee, you used to be known
as Big Al the teachers' pal. What's happened to you? Why
are you saying all these things now?

Well, first, I think you all know that I am not
attacking teachers. Teachers are as much the victims of a
system where they are forced to do things they don't want to do
and that in many cases they know will not work, because that's
what they're told to do. And if they didn't do it that way,
they would be in deep trouble.

So it's not a criticism of teachers; it's a criti-
cism of the way schools are organized. No more than it's a
criticism of auto workers that were losing that race. The auto
worker came and did what he was told to do. He didn't design
the automobile. He didn't design the product. He wasn't
responsible for the quality control or for anything else. He
was just told, here, sit there and do that or stand and do
that, and he did it.

But ultimately, it's the auto worker who pays the
price. And even though we are not the ones who are designing
the schools. We're carrying out the orders; we're doing it as
well as we possibly can. When all is said and done, if the
public loses faith in the schools, we will be, students and
teachers and others employed in the schools, will be victims
once again.

Now, secondly, I think we ought to know that I have
no view in my mind, as Bill Bennett seems to, that somehow
the schools have gotten worse; that once upon a time there was
a golden age where everyone sat in school and read Shakespeare
or James Madison and worked on probability theory and calculus,
and all of a sudden, along came teachers' unions and tenure
and collective bargaining and a few other things. Then all of
a sudden kids' scores went down, and they stopped learning,
and standards went down, that sort of thing.

That's nonsense. There was no golden age. In 1940
about 80 percent of the kids dropped out and only 20 percent
stayed in school. We are doing better than we ever did before.
We are keeping more kids in school for much longer periods of
time, and they are learning much more.

But that isn't—unfortunately, sometimes you can be
doing much better than you ever did before, but you're still
in trouble. For example, the automobiles that American manu-
facturers are making this year are a hell of a lot better than
the automobiles that they used to make in 1950. I don't know
of anybody who would trade this year's or last year's model for a 1950. But in 1950, everyone wanted an American car because there weren't any Japanese cars around. There wasn't any competition.

So it's not a question of are we better today. When kids dropped out in 1945, they dropped into a world where they could go out and make a lot of money in jobs that were there, good union jobs.

When they drop out today, there is not a world. It's not that we have gotten worse. We're doing better; a heck of a lot better than we ever did before.

But that doesn't mean that it's good enough. It's not our fault that it's not good enough, and it's not good enough not because there's something wrong with us. It's not good enough because the world around us has changed, and the consequences of not getting an education--

(Applause)

--the consequences of not getting an education are very different today than they were at that time.

Now, I think the third thing that's important here is that it's not true that if you acknowledge problems that you have that the public necessarily looks down on you and
criticizes you. And I think the best example to look at here is medicine. This country has spent billions of dollars in an effort to try to cure cancer over the last 20 years. And most areas, we're no closer now than we were before.

There are a few cancers that have been cured and solved. But some of them have actually increased.

I don't see any doctors walking around saying we have found a cure. I don't even hear them saying a cure is just around the corner, or we'll have a five-year report card on how well we're doing on this.

Doctors are honest with us. They say, it's tough. We don't know how to do it. We're working as hard as we can. And here's a new disease that pops up that threatens all of civilization, AIDS. We don't know very much. We're trying.

The idea that we should somehow turn this whole thing into public relations. I must say that I was just some months ago on a platform with leaders of various education groups on the national scene.

And one of the top leaders of the NEA at the end of that forum said, there's nothing wrong with American education that couldn't be cured if each of the organizations here would put up millions of dollars and we had a big television
commercial campaign telling everybody the schools are wonderful.

Well, that's what the auto manufacturers thought in 1965. They thought that if you just do a good promotion job, you don't have to worry about whether anybody else has a better automobile.

It will not work. Now, I think there is another reason for levelling with the public. They're going to know anyway, but there's something else out there, and that is the belief that if the schools aren't doing well, it's because teachers aren't planning their lessons right; it's because we're working too short a year; it's because we don't have high expectations of our youngsters.

Notice the whole thing is blaming the people there for what is happening. And somebody has to stand up and say, look, the system isn't working very well. And there are lots of kids who aren't making it. But it's not because of what we're doing.

We're not paid very well. We work hard as anything. And we are the first to be disappointed. We came into this field because of what we want to do for kids.

And it isn't what we're doing, or that we aren't trying hard, or that we're not good enough. Sure, we could
give a slightly better lesson, or slightly better this or that. Everybody can improve a little bit.

But the problems we've got are not in what we are doing. It's not in our efforts or in our intentions or our expectations. The problem is in the way you have organized this whole thing, just as it wasn't the auto worker who was laying down on the job. It was a stupid assembly line, and a rotten design of an automobile, and it wasn't the worker who wasn't working. (APPLAUSE)

Look at what's happening in the automobile industry. The Japanese have come over here and opened up some Japanese auto firms, run by Japanese managers, and hired exactly the same UAW people and put them into—exactly the same workers in a number of plants, some of them right here in California, are turning out excellent automobiles.

It wasn't the workers who weren't doing a good job. It was management that didn't know how to organize the system of production.

(Applause).

And so I would like to share with you what some of these results are. They never cease to shock me, even though I talk about them at least once a day. And I find them hard
to believe too.

But we do have one system of national assessment that most people have great confidence in. It's not perfect, but it's the best thing we have. It's called the National Assessment for Educational Progress. It's financed by the U.S. Government. This year we managed to get them a substantial increase in funds and also philosophy and direction, so we'll even have better assessments in the future.

But here's the evidence. These are 17-year-old kids who are being assessed nationally. Please don't just think that these are urban areas with a lot of kids who have got lots of problems. This is national.

These are 17-year-old kids who are still in school. That means the dropouts are gone, so these are the good kids who are going to graduate later this year. Positive selection. These results should be good. Dropouts are gone.

In the most difficult writing examination, it asks the youngster to write a letter to the manager of a supermarket a couple of blocks away from the school applying for a job. The letter is not marked for perfect grammar or perfect spelling. The idea is, can the kids give one or two arguments.
the dropouts have gone who can write that acceptable letter just before graduating high school is 20 percent: 20 percent. Eighty percent of those who are still in school write below that level, and then I'd have to flash on what they consider to be unacceptable. There's no difference as to what they consider to be unacceptable. There might be a difference as to whether the acceptable one is really acceptable. But there wouldn't be one in the other direction.

Now, very important. Second one: mathematics. Show the students six common fractions. The kinds that they get in class almost every day from the time that they get fractions. Nothing huge or fancy. And ask them to put these fractions in size places, smallest one first, largest one last, et cetera.

The percentage of graduating youngsters who can do that is 12 percent.

Now let's take this one. You give a kid a picture of a railroad or bus timetable. And you say to the kid, you are going from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C. What train do you have to catch on a weekday in order to get into Washington just before 6:00 p.m.?

The percentage of kids who were able to figure
The kid is told in the instructions, there will be a lot of applicants for the job, so be sure you make the best argument you can. So what they're looking for is something like, I used to work in my uncle's grocery store, and I know how important it is to come on time because I know you'll be counting on me. Or, I know you'll lose the whole day's profits if you don't know how to count change, and I know how to do that. Or I used to collect the dues, I was the treasurer of my Boy Scout troop. Or something like that. One or two reasons,

Critical thinking, persuasion, expression. Nothing very intellectual. This is not Shakespeare or Dickens. It's just writing a simple letter.

What I should have done is to flash some of the sample letters up on the screen here. We'll do that in the future. But something that the National Assessment considers to be an acceptable letter.

If you saw an acceptable letter, you would not think it was a very high standard. It is not high. It is so-so, you know. You wouldn't think much, but all right, let's accept that standard and say it's acceptable.

The percentage of kids who are still in school after
that out: 4.9. 4.9, 17-year-old kids, 4.9. By the way, if all minorities are excluded, and you have whites only in the sample, it's 5.9.

So I mean, look, we still have a lot of special things that need to be done for the years of discrimination and poverty and everything else for minorities to catch up, but the educational problem in this country, minorities are catching up, that's one of the results that the NAEP results show.

And if we get an administration that puts more into Chapter I and early childhood and these things, minorities will catch up.

But the problem is with our entire system as well.

(Applause)

Now, if you look at history, you've seen the results, the number of kids who know what half century Stalin lived in or Lincoln lived in or World War II took place in is just abysmally small. And there is no way you can have an intelligent discussion about any current event unless you have a placement of some things in history.

Is our helping contras in Nicaragua the equivalent of Munich which will result in a further conflict in the area?
Is it the equivalent of Vietnam, where we're going to get sucked into an unwanted war?

I mean, the thinking about history and current events is always in terms of what was it like that went on before? And you have to have pictures in your mind of who were the actors. What happened when? What happened before and after, and why?

And if you don't have that, you have no understanding, you have no basis, for making political decisions now, to say, I'm going to vote for this candidate rather than that one.

And if you look at the results, they don't have it. And the mathematics results that came out a few weeks ago, absolutely dismal.

Well, what percentage of the kids on the basis of this and other evidence are we educating? If you really want to talk about any sort of an intellectual standard, that is, a kid who can do really two or three step problems in mathematics, somebody who can read a really good book and understand it; somebody who can write a good letter, not just a minimally passable one and all that, it may be 9 percent, 10 percent, maybe less; maybe slightly more.

If you take these figures--now remember, 25 percent
of the kids have dropped out already. Some of those are smart kids who were angry, or got hooked on drugs or something else. But most of those kids would probably not do as well. They were having problems in school. Maybe we're educating 20 percent of the kids.

It depends on what standards you'd want to have. Maybe you would say we're educating 25 percent. Maybe you want to be real lenient and have really good public relations and say we're educating 30 percent. Maybe you'd haggle and you'd get me up to 35.

But I assure you that if you were sitting there with these results in front of you, the actual papers of what the kids are doing, I guarantee that there isn't a person in this room who, if they had the materials in front of them, who would say, we're educating 45 or 50 percent. There are very few who would say 40 or 35 or even 30.

Now that means that small changes will not work. I should add one other thing to these results. The results show that 75 to 80 percent of the kids are learning very little.

Now there's further bad news unfortunately. The kids who are learning, what you learn is that the way we learn in school can't be applied to anything in the real world. That
is, unless you're going to be a teacher or a college professor. Where it does come in real handy, no one goes to work with the notebooks that he had in high school or college and says, now let's see what I learned in that course, and applies it.

Instead, they turn to the person next to them and say, what are we doing here and how do we do it? That is, most people learn through some sort of apprenticeship or training program right on the job. And that's a whole new area of research that people are going into, saying, look, on the job you are expected to work with five or six other people.

In school, if a kid turns around to the one next to him and says, how do you do this, it's called cheating. In work, it's called collaboration.

If you got something wrong at work, and you didn't lean over to ask the person next to you, you'd be fired for that. Somebody would say, what's the matter with you? Are you crazy? You've got all sorts of people right around you who can help you.

In school we'd say, you've got to learn the whole thing individually or by yourself.

At work, there are all sorts of instruments. I mean nobody actually has to do all this division or anything else. You know, there are calculators and computers, and there are
all sorts of little tools that people have, on all sorts of jobs. Schools are placed where you almost never see these tools. You've got to do it all in your head. So all the kids who can do them, could do them if they had these gadgets, think they're dumb and think they're no good.

So a lot of kids who are pretty smart but can't manipulate abstract symbols outside of any context and do it all by themselves, who could be very valuable workers out there because they can work on a team and they can do it together and they can get the answer right, if it's a practical problem and if it's in context and they have tools to use, large numbers of kids are being told they're stupid because they can't do something which isn't going to do them very much good later on anyway.

So that's--we need to do a good deal of rethinking. And what we've got to do is ask ourselves why the schools are getting these results.

I've indicated, it's not because teachers are not committed or working hard. It is because of a system. And I want to touch on a few of the things that we do know.

We know that schools as now organized don't work for most kids. They don't work for most kids because 85
percent of what goes on in school is talk.

Now, if I were to ask you, what do you remember most, if you listen to people talk for six hours, or if you watch a movie, which one would you remember more?

If you listened to someone talk for six hours or if you sit down with three people and really do something together, what grabs you more?

I mean, there's no question about it that one of the things that gets our attention the least, that grabs us the least, is the thing that most school is made of.

So: a lot of talk. And by the way, it's the way schools are. You've got to cover the materials. You've got to talk because you've got to worry about what's going to be on those exams later on.

You've got to cover it, and you've got to rehearse, and you've got to practice. And essentially, most kids don't learn that way, and most adults don't learn very much that way. And we don't have another way of reaching most kids. We don't have the time, and we're not encouraged to do it.

If medicine were organized the way education is, then this would happen. You would go to a doctor. The doctor would look at you and listen to you, and he'd say, here, try
this medicine.

Three days later, you would return. And you'd say, doc, not only did that medicine not cure me but, look, I got this terrible rash from your medicine.

The doctor, if he were in the field of public education, would turn to you as the patient and say, you've got a hell of a lot of nerve not responding to my medicine, here, take more of it.

(Applause)

Now, seriously, what does the doctor do? The doctor doesn't blame you for not responding to his--the doctor says, I'm sorry. I gave you the right medicine. That works on most people. I'm sorry, it didn't work on you. It doesn't work on everybody.

And then he'd say, here, try this, and he'd give you something else. It's not your fault if you don't respond to a particular medicine.

And one of the things we need to do is to structure schools so that you know that when you're not reaching a kid through talk, you've got a second way. You've got the time. You've got the materials. You've got the support system to reach that kid a second way, a third way, a fourth way, a fifth
way, until the kid gets it.

(Applause)

Then we have the way schools are organized. As a
British business writer who did just a marvellous thing about
schools, and how secondary schools are organized. And he said,
a school is something like an office. It's not like a coal
mine and it's not like a paper mill. It's not like an auto
factory. It's not like working on a ship.

A school resembles an office where people are read-
ing things, and they're writing things, and they're listening
to people and they're passing paper. Now, suppose you had an
office. Let's say it's an insurance company or a bank or a
newspaper office or it's your union office or a school office.

And suppose you hired somebody and you said, Al,
here's your desk. Sit over here. And see that? You've got 25
other people working. They're doing the same work that you
are. But we don't want you ever to talk to them. Because
they do their work, and you do yours alone.

And you see that person over there? That's your
manager. And your manager is going to come over and tell you
exactly what to do, and then you do it.

And by the way, in 45 minutes, a bell will ring.
We want you to leave this desk and this room and the people sitting around you and that manager, and we want you to walk up to 412 where you will have another boss who will give you a totally different job to do. You will have 25 other coworkers sitting around you. We don't you to talk to them either. And you will be 45 minutes in that room and then another bell will ring.

And every 45 minutes we're going to give you a different job to do and a different boss to relate to and 25 other coworkers that we don't want you to have any conversation with.

If you organized a bank that way, or a newspaper office, or your union office, you would be driven out. People would say, you don't know what you're doing. It's hard enough to work for one boss, you organize a union against him. But imagine having seven different bosses in a day; seven different personalities, different sets of expectations.

People can't just turn around and do a different job and do it in 45 minutes. It takes them time to get adjusted. What about the kid who doesn't get it until the 40th minute? He's just starting to get the hang of it. The bell rings; off we go.
Now, this system makes sense if you think of the student as an inanimate object going through an assembly line, and the first teacher is putting this bolt on, and the second one is tightening this screw, and the third one is doing something else.

If you view the school as a factory, in which the teacher is the worker, and in which the student is an inanimate object being worked on externally, this makes perfect sense. You're going from one to another to another on the assembly line. You move from teacher to teacher during the day. And each year you move from teacher to teacher, and that's the whole thing.

But you know, nobody can educate anybody else. Education is something that a person does for himself or herself. The teacher can create--

(Applause)

--the student is the worker in the school. If the student doesn't do the work, the student will never learn, no matter how brilliantly the teacher does the job.

(Applause)

The teacher is the manager of the work. The
teacher can have ideas as to what kind of things to put before
the students that will get the students to be engaged and to be
motivated and to work. The teacher is really the manager and the
student is the worker. But we don't organize schools in that
way. Well, that's something we need to think about. That
was secondary schools.

What about elementary schools? Well, one education-
al writer has said that if children had to learn how to speak--
something that they all have to do; and it's very difficult
learning how to speak, because you can't look back at the
words as you can in reading.
People have different pronunciations of words. You have to be listening at the rate I'm speaking. You cannot control that. Whereas when you're reading, you can go over it and you can control your own rate. But all kids learn how to speak.

But somebody said if kids had to learn how to speak the way they are taught in schools, they would never learn how to speak. And here's a description of how we would teach kids, might teach kids how to speak in school.

And suppose we decided that we had to teach children to speak, how would you go about it? Well, first, some committee of experts would analyze speech and break it down into a number of speech skills. And they'd say that speech is made up of sounds, and a child must be taught to make all of the sounds of his language before he can be taught to speak the language.

Well, then, we would list the sounds, the easiest ones first and the commonest ones first, and the hardest ones and the rarest ones later. Then we would begin to teach infants these sounds, working our way down the list.

When the child had learned to make all the sounds on the sound list, we would begin to teach him to combine
sounds into syllables.

When he could say all the syllables on the syllables list, we would begin to teach him the words on our word list.

At the same time, we would teach him the rules of grammar, by means of which he could combine these newly learned words into sentences.

Everything would be planned, and nothing would be left to chance. There would be plenty of drill, review, and standardized tests to make sure that he's not forgotten anything.

Now suppose we tried to do this? What would happen?

What would happen quite simply is that most children, before they got very far, would become baffled, discouraged, humiliated and fearful. And they would quit doing what we asked them.

Now the interesting thing when a kid first starts to speak, and I know because I'm a grandfather whose grandchild is just starting to speak, the first sounds that come out of a baby's mouth, we don't say, that's not a word.

We say, look, he's speaking, and we grab him and we hug him and we say how wonderful it is.

(Applause)

So one of the things that we know as parents, and we know that--what do we say about principals and about school
superintendents, we say the one thing you must never do if you
want to get the faculty really to work and to pitch in, never
humiliate anybody.

You can criticize. You can show people how they
might do better. But never humiliate anybody. What do we
do in school? Not because we intend to. But if we constantly
call on a kid who doesn't know the answers to recite in front
of all the other kids in the class, that kid is being humiliated
in front of all his colleagues. That's the way the class is
organized.

We don't intend to do it. But a lot of kids stop
trying because of that humiliation.

Well, these are the problems we have. Another
problem is the way we group kids. You can make a kid feel
terrific by grouping him in such a way that he's the best kid
in the group. He'll feel great.

You can knock the stuffings out of another kid if
he's always in a group where he's the lowest. I'd like to
share with you the kind of thinking that needs to go on in our
schools, and that we as teachers need to be involved in, because
nobody else can really do this, or will do it.

After our last conference, last October, I had the
privilege of visiting our colleagues in the German teachers' union. And I visited a school in Cologne. And I'm not offering this to you as the answer, so that everybody goes out and has a Cologne school in their district. It is a way of thinking about how by changing a few things and thinking about a few things, you can make a very big difference.

It's a challenge to build your own, and to do your own, to think about your own. It is not a challenge to ask you to copy somebody else's, although there are some good elements in it that deserve some copying.

But here's a school. It's an urban school. It's got 2,200 kids. There are a lot of Turkish kids and Moroccan kids and Greek kids. So there's multiculturalism and multilingualism. It's not a nice neat school with a lot of obedient middle class German children.

This is a school, a secondary school in Germany. All of the kids are tested in the fourth grade. And let me tell you, if you're real smart, they send you to Gymnasium. And if you're not so smart, they send you to Realschule. And if you're at the bottom of the pack, they send you to something called Hauptschule.

This is a comprehensive school. And that means
most of the kids who were told they were smart on the basis of the test have gone off to Gymnasium, and this school takes the bottom two groups, the two that were told they're not smart enough to go to college.

And the results in this school are amazing. Because it takes lots of kids who were told they can't go to college. And it has them pass a national examination which actually does send them on to college. Now what does the school do?

The first thing that happens is, you are not assigned to a class. When you come to the school, you are told, Mr. Shanker, here are seven other teachers who are part of your team. There are eight teachers on your team. And here are the record cards for, say, 120 kids. These are going to be your kids. They'll be here in a few days.

It is the job of your team to make the following decisions. They will not be made by the principal or by the superintendent or by a computer or by a programmer or by anybody else. Your team of teachers will decide the following.

How do you break these kids up into groups of classes? Which teachers teach what subjects? And teachers who are good at teaching reading may not be that good at teaching writing, et cetera. So everyone plays to their strengths.
The next thing that happens is, you have no bells here. And therefore, you don't have to move every 40 minutes. You make the decision. You want to keep the kids a whole morning for math? Fine. A whole afternoon for German? Okay. After the first week you find that all morning for math is too much, the kids are getting restless, you can change it. You can change it anytime your team wants to. It's your business. It's not the business of the rest of the school.

The only thing we're concerned about is the kids are learning.

The next thing we want to tell you, you see these kids you're getting? You're getting them in the fifth grade, and they're not graduating until age 19. They're going to be in this school.

Your team of teachers will have these same kids from the fifth grade through age 19. That means you're not going to spend until Thanksgiving each year learning the names of 150 new kids, and it means you're not going to pack up the first week in June because you're got to get ready to pass them on to the next teacher. You are the next teacher.

And you're not going to be able to say you got a bunch of kids from the teacher who ruined them last year.
And you can't wait to pass them on to the next one because there's not much you can do with them. You will be with them long enough so that you will live to look at yourself in the mirror and say to yourself, whatever good has happened to them, I take the credit. And a lot of the bad things, I am responsible.

It takes a bureaucratic factory situation and turns it into a moral community.

Finally, there's very little lecturing or talking in the classrooms. The kids are tables of five doing what we call cooperative learning. That is, they get problems and questions where the kids help each other. No child is ever asked a question to perform in front of the whole group unless you know in advance that he's going to look good.

The embarrassment if any is in that small group where he's shielded by friends.

Now, is this a perfect system? No. Should teachers stay with kids for that many years? Maybe not. Maybe it should be two years; maybe three, instead of that many.

Do you give up something? Sure. Maybe not all teachers can teach the fifth grade and teach the last grade
of high school. That's quite a span. Maybe it's not true that all teachers will relate to kids of all those different age groups.

Maybe they should be two-year blocks, or three-year blocks, or different ways of organizing. But the only question I'm raising is that everything we take for granted, which is that you're assigned the kids. The bell rings every 45 minutes. You teach this. This is how you group them. This is what you do. That what this school has done is to question everything that's done, and to say you can do it differently.

They are successful. That isn't the only way of doing it. Dade County schools are involved in a remarkable experiment where over 40 schools are managing themselves. They submitted proposals, and they are managing themselves.

It is probably the largest experiment going on in the United States of teachers, and actually, not just teachers, but all the members of the faculty cooperating and building a school.

Now the question I want to raise is, how do we make this happen? If we are going to improve schools, it's going to be because things like these are tried in different places. And when they're first tried, they're not going to look so good.
When you try something new, it's messy.

And the first things that are tried, you may have to abandon half of what you tried, and keep half; and keep trying and trying and trying until you get it right.

As a matter of fact, a school is a type of organization where it's never going to be perfect. And as a matter of fact, that's what the automobile manufacturers are finding out, that even when you manufacture inanimate objects, you're got to give the workers who are working with these inanimate objects enough decision-making power so that when they see that the light has changed or the metal has changed or something else, you've got to give them the power to constantly make adjustments and to use their intelligence or initiative, or otherwise, you're not going to make good automobiles.

Now, how do we do this? I suggest that we continue to try to do the kinds of things that Dade and a few others are doing, and that is to try to do some things on a school wide basis or even on a systemwide basis. That's fine, where it can be done.

But in many places, you can't do it on a school wide basis. And therefore I suggest that wherever we have a team of teachers--notice that in this German school, that team
of eight teachers, that's really a whole school. Because those eight teachers, it's almost as if nobody else were in the school. They stay with the same kids, the same teachers. They could have their own building; they don't.

In that school they do have a faculty senate, and the teachers on each team elect a person to the faculty senate--by the way, the principal of each school in Germany must be in the classroom with kids for at least six hours a week; that's German law.

(Applause)

By the way, that's the way the German principals feel about it, too. They don't feel it's punishment. They feel that cements their relationship with the faculty.

And in Germany, you'd probably have a strike of principals if they were told they were going to be full time administrators outside the classroom and change that relationship.

But in that school, the principal cannot do anything without a majority vote of the faculty senate. It's a democratic school for the faculty.

But what we need, in the next year or two, and it won't happen unless each and every one of you returns to a
local and tries to make this happen, wherever you have six, seven, eight, nine, 12, 20 teachers, we have to find a way of allowing those people, provided that they have a good idea and are willing to work on it, and provided there are parents who are voluntarily willing to have their children in such a school, which will be a different type of institution, we have to permit those teachers to have a school of their own.

Now, a few months ago, I suggested this at a national press club conference, and I called these opt-for schools, and some people called them schools within schools. Since then somebody has sent me a book on this issue. And this person has a very good notion. He calls them charter schools. Charter.

Think of the fact that every local in the AFT has received a charter from the AFT. You received the charter because we have confidence in you. We're not telling you what to do. We're not directing you. We're chartering you to accomplish the purposes and missions that you set out to do.

And we've got thousands of locals across the country that are totally autonomous. They're not under our control. And yet look at all of us and how well we work together throughout the year on legislative, political,
collective bargaining.

If you will get good people out there, and you give them a charter, give them the opportunity to work independently, they can do a good job. And it is very much like sending Henry Hudson off with his charter from the East India Company.

A charter is usually granted by someone. It ought to be granted jointly by the union and by the board of education in any district. They say, we jointly give these teachers the right to set up their own sub-school in accordance with the following principles.

They usually issue a charter because the people out there are going to be working in territory that is sort of dangerous and unexplored. That's what all of you are doing in your districts all the time. That's what Henry Hudson did.

We can't centrally know all the problems that you are going to be facing locally. We as a national organization and the school district ought to provide support. And we ought to say to these people that the charter goes for five years or for seven years so that you've got enough time to put the thing into shape, and know that you're not going to get a new principal or a new superintendent who's going to come in
after you've invested all that work and effort, that somebody's
going to say, stop, we don't like what you're doing anymore,
and pull that out from under you, which is true of so many
educational experiments.

Now, this isn't the 1960s. This idea does not
mean that anybody can go off and do his own thing. Proposals
would have to be submitted that deals with cooperative learning,
how to individualize instructions, the use of technology,
kids working in groups and adults working in groups. How to
get away from talking and use other ways of reaching kids.

So there would be proposals that would be submitted
and would have to be a scheme of evaluation, although hopefully
we would get away from the crazy standardized tests that are
driving us all to narrow the curriculum as we get people to
fill in forms with little answers that don't mean very much.

Now, we will need--I want to conclude by talking about
the problems that this will raise. Many union members feel
uncomfortable about getting into the area of trying to change
the schools. They say that's not what a union was there to
do. We're good at negotiating. We're good at political
action. We're good at bargaining contracts. But we don't
really know about this. I wasn't elected as a union leader,
they say, because I knew how to do this.

Of course, when we all started, we didn't know how to negotiate either, because there was no collective bargaining. And we learned, with some help from the AFT and some training programs. But mostly we learned through our own trying it.

Teachers felt the same way not too many years ago. Twenty years ago teachers felt the same way about being involved in politics. I remember standing in front of a delegate assembly as president of the New York local in 1968 just weeks before the election between Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon.

And I suggested that the union endorse Hubert Humphrey. And I was booed down. I mean, I was popular with the troops, but on that issue, I was booed and voted down.

It wasn't that our teachers were for Richard Nixon or against Hubert Humphrey. In those days they thought it was the wrong thing for a union to be involved in politics. They said if you get involved in politics, you're going to get away from the main thing which is collective bargaining, and the negotiation of contracts.

All, you're going to get too friendly with these
politicians. And before you know it you'll start wondering whether you want to be nice to the guy you helped elect, or whether you want to punch him in the nose to get a good contract. And they certainly had a point; there's no question about it.

But it was a year later that New York City teachers found out that their whole contract and job security and everything else depended on the governor and the state legislature.

And none of us any longer have to make the argument as to whether we should be involved in politics. We know that that is money. It's Prop. 13. It's tuition tax credits. It's privatization. We know now that politics is as essential to our being as any contract we ever negotiated, or any grievance we ever handled.

And I submit to you that the improvement of our schools is just as essential. It will not make much difference if the UAW negotiates great contracts and handles terrific grievances if we produce automobiles that can't compete with the Japanese. There won't be an auto industry or an auto union or grievances or anything else there.

And there won't be an AFT or a public education
system in this country unless we do it. No one else can do it.

And I hope that as a result of this convention and
the support that we offer to you after the convention, that we
in the American Federation of Teachers go on to make more
history than we have.

We've already made it. We brought collective
bargaining to America's teachers. But when the history books
are written ten or twenty years from now, I would like a
chapter that would show the kind of danger that public education
was in, and would show that the only group of people who were
there in the classrooms, who were there with the kids, that the
only group of people who know and can figure out over a period
of time what's wrong, that they would be involved in turning
schools around.

Now the greatest problem that we have is that
most people in education who engage in educational experiments
are not very much liked. They're not liked very much because
most educational experimenters in the past have been very
arrogant. They have kind of said, we know the answer. The
rest of you who were not involved in our experiment, you're
lazy or you're not really committed.

And if you weren't lazy and if you were committed,
you would be doing what we're doing.

In other words, many people who have gone off to try these things kind of say, the rest of you are terrible. You're bad teachers. You're really hurting the kids. We are the only moral and truly good people.

And of course, first of all, they're wrong. They don't know what they're doing. Most of them fall on their face. But frequently, we help them fall on their faces, because nobody likes to be put in that position, a position of inferiority.

We are not saying that these chartered schools are superior or that the people are superior. Think of it this way: the fact that there are people engaged in medical research does not mean that they are superior people and that the practicing doctor is inferior. Nor does it mean that the practicing doctor is doing the wrong things.

The people who are doing the things they're doing on a day-by-day basis are doing what they know how to do and what they're expected to do. The researcher is trying to figure out new and better ways of doing things next year and five years from now and ten years from now.

And the role of these charter schools is not to set
an example of what a perfect model is. The role of these is to find new ways for other people.

And the fact that you have doctors engaged in medical research does not demean the role of the practitioner; it elevates the role of the entire profession.

Wouldn't it be great if in thousands of our communities we could turn the parents, who see what some of the bad results are, and say, look, we know, but nobody knows how to solve that problem. It's true here. It's true in other countries. The kids are not learning these things.

We're doing the best job we can. And in addition to doing the best job we can, we have the following group out there that is seeking new answers, and we support them and we help them, because we too are concerned.

We came into this profession not for the money. We knew that it didn't pay well. We came in because we wanted to do something for these kids. We want all of them to learn. We want more of them to learn. And we're doing the best job we can, and we are supporting those people who are going to find better ways yet.

And each year things will get better, because people will find new and better ways of doing it.
It's a tall order, but so is collective bargaining. And I hope that throughout this convention, and I hope that when we leave it, I hope that when we come back two years from now, that in addition to the relatively small number of districts that are now engaged in pioneering efforts, I hope that each and everyone of you will enable me to stand here a few years from now and say that we've got 300, 500, 700, 1,000 places where there are six or eight or 12 or 15 or 20 teachers who, with the support of their union and the support of their faculty, and the support of their school system, are trying to make a system that will work better than the one we have today.

I know that we can do it.

(Standing ovation)