

## "ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS"

Delivered by Albert Shanker  
President, American Federation of Teachers  
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You are, in a way, the easiest audience for new and somewhat radical ideas -- and, in a way, the most difficult. You are people who take ideas seriously; most people in education don't. You're people who've created new ideas; most of you have stuck your necks out -- you've risked and experimented. So it's easy to stand before this group and come up with something new because that's what you're doing all the time. But you're also a difficult audience because you have tried very hard and in many cases you've got a lot to show for it. Many of you are from districts that we have read about -- or will read about soon. So you're likely to feel that we don't have to talk about how to make radical changes in schools -- that if other people elsewhere just do what you're doing, a lot of very significant improvements can be made without any radical change.

And it's true that significant change is taking place. Five years ago, very few people were talking about restructuring, and fewer were doing it. Now, many more are and will be. But "restructuring" has also become one of those buzz words; to show you're with it, you have to say you're restructuring your school. For the most part, it's lip service; probably 99 percent of the people who say they're restructuring their schools are lying. For the most part, what's called restructuring is nothing but the old status quo dressed up with a new word and maybe a few different procedures. A meeting like this about school restructuring that attracts 4,000 people might seem like a sign that the whole

system of public education is about to change. We look like we're part of a mass movement. We've come from all over the country and all kinds of different places. But when you start counting the 16,000 school districts in this country, and 100,000 schools, and you ask, "In how many of those places is anything significant happening?" you see that real change is practically nonexistent. The number of schools and school districts that are restructuring is very small.

So the question that I want to address today is how can we turn the scattered efforts to transform our schools into a mass movement? We know restructuring can happen in school districts where they have a wonderful union leader and a wonderful superintendent who have been working cooperatively, as well as a supportive community. But how can we make it happen in places that don't have all these things going for them? How can we get ordinary people -- not the superhuman types, the heroes, but ordinary people -- to do the right thing? That's a job that almost any system has. It's not a question of finding exceptional people. You can always find a few exceptions. You know -- the people they make movies about, the ones who work miracles. But watching a miracle worker perform isn't much help unless the person can show us how to do it. So the question I'll be dealing with is whether there is a way we can turn school restructuring into something that everyone can do -- and can carry on. Because continuity is also part of the problem.

Even in places where steady change is taking place, I wonder about the future of some of the things we are doing. What will happen when the superintendent leaves? What will happen when the school board changes? What will happen when the union leader leaves? How deeply are the changes rooted? How much are they institutionalized? And how much are they the result of a fortunate set of circumstances that will be

with us for a while and then will end up as a historical footnote about this noble experiment that took place towards the end of the 20th century?

My own experience with trying to bring about change has been something like one of those old preachers who used to go from town to town. They'd get a lot of people at a meeting and talk about the wages of sin and give them a picture of the lives of those who abandoned sin. At the time, everybody in the audience would be enthusiastic and a believer; they'd all be thinking they weren't going to sin again. But when the preacher comes back the next week, he finds they've all gone back to their usual ways.

I know that all of you who have tried and who are trying -- and even those of you who are very successful -- know how hard it is to bring about change. You know how many people you've got to talk to and the compromises you've got to make -- and you know how much it takes out of you. So I think the issue of how we can get large numbers of people to do this is a key issue.

Now, before I go into the substance of how we make change stick, I've got to discuss, to stress, something many of you have heard me talk about before -- the abysmal level of student achievement in our schools. I have to do it again and again because I have a feeling that one of the main reasons there isn't much change in our schools, the reason that we -- unions, school boards, superintendents, teachers and others -- are not moving faster and moving more radically is that we don't really know or want to know or don't believe how bad things are. We tell ourselves that things are bad only in those places with at-risk kids, so all right, let's do something over there. And if things can be shaped up a little bit here, let's do it. But why change the entire

system unless we have to? That's the way people are, they don't change things unless they feel they must. So it's important that we know intellectually -- and that we have a gut feeling about -- how urgent and how bad this problem is.

Looking at results for 17-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) should give us that sense of urgency. Remember, I'm talking about 17-year-old kids who are about to graduate from high school. The dropouts have dropped out, and we now have the 70-75 percent who are still there. More than half of them are about to go off to colleges and universities. So these are the successful kids.

The assessments divide students into four or five categories: In the bottom category are the people you might call totally illiterate, totally innumerate. And the good news in American education is that we have almost none of those; most people can read some words and they can handle some numbers. In the next two categories are people who have mastered the basics. They can follow some simple written material, answer some specific questions about it and make some generalizations, but not much more. They can add and subtract and multiply and divide whole numbers. The good news here is that the majority of in-school 17-year-olds can perform at this level, a level that corresponds to what we used to think of as late elementary school or maybe 7th-grade work.

The fourth level is what the national assessment usually calls "adequate." I wouldn't call it adequate -- and I don't think you would -- but, after all, the national assessment is funded by Congress, and if they gave this level some sort of a bad name, a lot of people would be after them. Achieving at this level means writing a simple one- or two-paragraph persuasive letter that deals with a single idea like convincing someone to hire you. It doesn't have to be perfect; it can

have some spelling errors in it and some grammatical errors. Yet only 20 percent of these 17-year-olds can write this kind of letter. In math, being adequate means being able to compute with decimals, fractions and percents -- something you should know way before you enter high school. Yet only half of the graduating, "successful" 17-year-olds can do this kind of math.

The top category is the one where you can understand a piece of technical writing or something like an editorial in the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal; you can write a good letter of a page or two talking about yourself and why you should be hired, or about something else; and you can solve a multi-step verbal problem in mathematics -- nothing very complex, nothing required, really, except some algebra and arithmetic, but you can read the problem and carry out the steps to solve it. So, what percentage of kids reach the highest level in the United States? Only about 6 percent can do a math problem like the one I described; 4 percent can do the writing sample; and 5 percent can read a piece of writing comparable to an editorial in a good newspaper. That's it -- 4, 5 or 6 percent of those 17-year-olds who are still in school. And the results are no better for science, history or literature.

How does that compare with other countries? I'm not going to deal with Japan because that's a different society, a different culture. Let's talk about other democratic, industrial countries like England, France, Germany, Holland, Belgium and Sweden, that have cultures similar to our own. They don't have a national assessment like ours, but they all have either national or provincial examinations for entry into college. These are much harder exams than our own. Some of them

take days. They involve essays, problems in math and science -- they are hard. Every single kid who does well enough on these exams to get into college in those countries -- and some who don't go to college -- would be in the top category of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, probably even higher.

How many is that? Well, in Great Britain, where they have the smallest percentage, 15 to 17 percent of their students pass examinations more difficult than the NAEP as compared with our 4 to 6 percent who attain the highest level in the NAEP test. In Germany it's about 27 percent. In other words, these other countries produce at least four or five times as many students at the highest achievement levels as we do.

Now, let's look at only one implication of these countries' performance, the issue of teacher quality. Every teacher in Germany comes from a group of students who perform at the level of the top 4 percent of American students. That would be like having all American teachers -- not some, but all -- coming from our top 5 or 6 percent of students, the ones who go into nuclear physics, medical research, to name but two fields.

Many Americans are very satisfied with their schools because they see their children going on to college; 55 percent of our high school graduates do, whereas by European standards, only about 4 to 6 percent would go. But people compare their kids with the kids down the road and the kids next-door, and they feel that their kids are doing a little better than the neighbor's kids -- and that's as far as they go. They don't realize that their kids are going to college only because the colleges don't have any standards. They don't stop to think that if we followed European standards, few of their kids would see the inside of a college. And they don't see that the overwhelming majority of our

students who go to college are getting their elementary school, junior high school and high school education in college. That is what we have to internalize. That has to become part of our gut understanding about the necessity for change.

When European countries unite in 1992, they're going to form a single economic bloc and we're going to face competition from a United Europe in addition to what we now have from Japan, Korea and Singapore. We're also going to have to deal more with Canadian competition. I want all of us to think about what is about to happen to our future as a country if education systems in other countries produce as many as 30 percent of students who can function at a level where maybe 5 percent of our students can function. We have to ask ourselves how long our country will tolerate it -- and how long we can survive. We need to start with the understanding that what we have now can't continue. And the longer it continues, the heavier the price we will have to pay.

It's like borrowing: While you're spending the borrowed money, you might feel pretty good. But when you start paying back, the more you've borrowed, the longer it takes to set it straight. And that's true here, too. The signs that something is going to change are clear. And I hope enough people in education out there will see them because fear is a great motivator. If you don't think so, just look at one of the American Express television ads.

In recent years, the country has moved to deregulate various industries. We saw airline deregulation and the deregulation of telephone service, just to name two. And we heard too that people should be allowed to innovate. But during this time we had a big book of regulations called reform thrown at us in almost every state. And the message was: "Even though we think everybody else can do a better

job if the government doesn't tell them what to do, we'd better give people in education very careful instructions or they'll get it all wrong."

But now we have many other signs that we'd be crazy to disregard. Last year, the state legislature of Illinois passed a bill to reorganize Chicago's schools. Similar proposals are being considered for other big cities like Detroit and New York City. The Chicago reform sets up boards of education for every school in the system -- boards with a parent majority. These boards will have the right to hire and fire principals, who will be employed on three- or four-year performance contracts. This means, of course, that boards will be able to tell principals, if the principals want to keep their job, what the curriculum should be, what books to use, which teachers should be spotted for removal, and so forth. These boards with parent majorities are a signal that our present school boards, administrators and professionals are not trusted to run the schools.

And then there's the choice movement. And what is that saying? It's legislatures saying to parents, "Look, we told the professionals and the school boards what to do, but they'll probably muck it up. So the least we can do is give you the right to get out from under and go elsewhere to rescue your kid. And maybe if you all leave, that'll shape them up." I don't think it will work that way, but that's the message of this choice movement.

And then there's educational bankruptcy legislation permitting state education departments to take over school boards and districts. That's another sign. The movement for tuition tax credits is also gaining more popularity -- though more at the state than the national level. Wisconsin will have a major move for vouchers this year supported by the



governor, which will include vouchers for nonpublic schools. Kansas City has a new court case asking for vouchers for black kids to attend private schools. And don't bet any money that the current Supreme Court will take the same positions on the separation of church and state that previous Supreme Courts did.

Another alarming sign is coming from Margaret Thatcher's Great Britain, where the parents in any state-run school can vote to remove the school from the public system and operate it as a parent-run, publicly funded private school. That reform took place in England last year, and I can tell you some Republican governors expressed a favorable view of this reform at the Republican Conference of Governors in Denver last year. By the way, once a school has "opted out," the board of governors the parents elect has full control; no other legal or contractual or other relationships are in force.

A recent, front-page article from the Wall Street Journal (June 27) suggests that businesses discouraged by the lack of good results are rethinking their aid to public schools. Some now seek broad change -- like year-round schools and contracting out teaching. Business may even run their own schools. A Chicago coalition of 50 companies has already opened a private, tuition-free, inner-city school. The sponsors have pledged to show the same amount of money as the public schools do but with much better results.

A number of months ago, a former vice-president of IBM, Jack Bowsher, who had been in charge of IBM's internal education programs, spoke to the AFT Executive Council and gave us a picture of how business would view what's needed in education. He told us that if the folks at IBM had a factory that was producing computers, and if 30 percent of the computers fell off the assembly line while they were being manufactured

and 95 percent of the computers that were produced didn't work most of the time, the last thing in the world IBM would do would be to run the assembly line another month a year or another hour a day. Their move would be to rethink the whole process.

And that's what we need to do. Otherwise, we'll end up like the frogs in an experiment I heard about recently. If you put a frog in a pot of cool water, the frog will enjoy it. If you start raising the temperature, the frog will say, "Gee, it feels nice and warm here." And if you just keep heating up the water slowly, until it reaches the boiling point, the frog will never jump out. It will be boiled to death, without realizing there's any danger because the frog will have slowly adjusted to the changes in temperature until it's too late. And that's the spot that we in American public education seem to be in.

None of these threats to public education is happening very quickly. But the heat is being raised in Chicago and it's being raised in Chelsea, Mass., where a school board has decided to turn over a public school system to a private institution, Boston University, for a period of ten years. What is the message of John Silber, Boston University's president? He says school boards are corrupt and incompetent and that the union and the school management don't care. Silber says the way to run schools is to give them over to a tough guy like him, who won't bother with open meetings or be subject to conflict of interest laws or comply with public interest rules. He's going to show everybody that if you hand over a school district to somebody who has dictatorial powers, that person can really get results for you. Silber's interest is not Chelsea -- he first tried to take over Boston and other school systems -- he's really interested in showing us that the way we run our schools is fundamentally wrong. Just get rid of the

school board and the public interest laws, push the unions out of the way and put somebody in there who can get the same powers as somebody who owns a business. He'll shape up everybody. Well, we're either going to jump while we feel the water getting warm or we are going to become frog soup.

So, let's talk about bringing about change. Teachers and administrators, school board members and state superintendents -- everybody resists change. But schools are no more resistant to change than any other institution in our society. People don't change unless they have to. And they usually make the smallest change that will keep them comfortable. You can understand that. If I'm a teacher, I have a certain set of books, a certain set of lessons, a certain set of tests and all sorts of projects that I do with my kids -- things I've developed over a period of time. Then, somebody comes along with a totally new method. I know what I'm doing now, but I don't know if I'm going to be able to adjust to the new system, and I don't know how long it will take for me to be as good at the new one as I am at the one I've developed over the years. I also don't know if all that work that I'll have to put in will be worth the difference. I don't even know whether this new thing has been researched by anybody or whether it's just the product of the latest superintendent trying to get his name in the newspapers for being innovative. So by nature and experience, there is an awful lot of resistance to change. The question is what can we do to bring about substantial improvement.

The history of collective bargaining gives us a hint. We had collective bargaining in a number of places before there were any collective bargaining laws. And we probably could have gone on like that forever: Wherever we had a strong union and strong union

leadership and management that was willing either to agree to collective bargaining or could be pushed into it, we'd have had collective bargaining in these places. But how much collective bargaining would there now be if we'd done it that way and hadn't pursued collective bargaining systematically? Much less. We got collective bargaining because we created a system, a system through law, which changed everything. It spread collective bargaining to places where it otherwise would not have taken root, and now teachers in half the states in the country enjoy collective bargaining.

The question is what kind of system can we create now to institutionalize school restructuring? Because we can't wait for change to happen place by place, we need to create a system that will make mass change happen.

I think the answer is to adapt some of the principles that inform our economy to our schools.

For many years, throughout the world, two philosophies about how to make people work effectively have competed with each other. One of those philosophies, the free market or capitalism, is what we have in this country. The others are the command economies -- we know this system as communism. Command economies are planned from above. An economist from such a system might compare his system and ours in terms like these: "If you control things from above, you don't have a lot of waste. In a market system, you'll have eight different outfits making competing automobiles. Some of them won't be any good. There's a lot of waste -- wasted effort and wasted materials. A free market system can't work. In a command economy, everything is planned, directed and coordinated by the government, and certain people do certain things. This eliminates waste. Everybody is paid pretty much the same, and this

eliminates the injustices you get from some people earning a lot and others earning less."

The debate over the merit of the two systems went on in many countries, including our own. But we live in a fascinating time in world history, when it seems that this debate is turning into a chorus of approval for the market approach. The leaders of the communist countries who said you don't need economic incentives to get people to work -- they're all standing up saying, "We were wrong. Our command systems don't work. They don't produce anything." Because no matter how much you plan from the top, no matter how many accountability systems you create, no matter how many inspectors you put in, no matter how many little award programs you set up to recognize outstanding workers -- no matter how many people you send off to the gulag as punishment for not working hard enough -- the system doesn't work.

Russia will produce less wheat this year than it did in the last year of the czar. And I'm not asking for a restoration of the czar -- my parents came this way. But it doesn't work. And they are now all calling for perestroika -- for restructuring. Look at the farmers in China who couldn't feed themselves. But ten years ago, when the party bosses said to the farmers, "All right, you keep what you grow; you keep the wheat, the rice and the tomatoes and just pay a tax on it," all of a sudden a system that didn't produce anything produced enough to feed all of China and parts of the rest of the world, as well.

A market system has a lot of problems, but in the long run it gets people to be innovative, it gets people to be entrepreneurial, it gets people to be creative. I'm not saying the only thing people ever think about in life is money; there are other important incentives. But I am saying that no system really works where money isn't one of the major

incentives.

What does that have to do with encouraging school restructuring? With how we can change our system so we produce results that are substantially better than the ones we are getting today? If you believe, as I do, that our schools operate like a command economy and show all of the defects and limits of command economies, then the rejection of command economies by all these countries has much to tell us about changing our schools.

And so I have a few ideas about putting some of the market forces I've been talking about to work in our schools and using incentives for students and teachers. They are not perfected ideas. In fact, I'd call them educated guesses, but I'm very committed to them. When they're criticized, modified to some extent and tried out, I believe they'll work. And if you don't like the incentive system I'm proposing, then come up with a substitute. But remember, we do not have a choice of keeping what we have right now. The choice is John Silber, tuition tax credits, parent boards, radical privatization on the one hand, or something else that we'll have to come up with on the other. And it should be a powerful enough model to sell, perhaps to the president of the United States, perhaps to Congress, and if not there, to governors or to local communities and to businesses.

First: student incentives. Many reports and the experiences of a couple of million teachers tell us that most students do not work very hard. The exception is the 5 or 6 percent going on to elite colleges. Students are bored; they're disengaged; their biggest question is, "Do I have to do this in order to pass?" Why is that? Are they more stupid than students used to be or more stupid than European or Japanese students? Are they lazier? I don't think so. And most of them do

not lack parents and teachers who tell them, "Work hard, study, and that will mean something to you later on in life. Look what you'll be able to do. Look what your uncle did or your cousin or that person we saw on television."

But you know something, kids are just like adults; they do exactly what they have to do in order to get what they want -- get a job or go to college. And they're smart. Kids know they don't have to do anything to get into college except graduate from high school. Once upon a time, when colleges required foreign languages for admission, kids took foreign languages. When they required a certain level of proficiency in mathematics, kids attained that proficiency. Now that most colleges don't require much at all besides money, kids are not becoming proficient.

Kids who are going into the work force right after high school know the same thing. John H. Bishop ["Why the Apathy in American High Schools," Educational Researcher, Jan.-Feb. 1989] pointed out that the diploma matters to them, but nothing else does. They know that the only thing an employer will ask is, "Did you graduate from high school?" But it makes no difference to the employer whether that kid attended school regularly or not. That employer never asks the school how hard the kid worked or whether the kid took three years of mathematics and a year of physics and a year of chemistry or a whole bunch of soft courses. And the kids know that. They know as soon as they go out to get a part-time job at McDonald's. McDonald's doesn't ask them about their attendance record or how well they're doing. McDonald's doesn't ask them for a letter of reference from their teachers. McDonald's just says, "Come on in and work." And the kid who is a straight-A student gets exactly the same salary as the kid who is flunking all his courses.

We're teaching our kids that school doesn't count. And when they leave school to get a permanent job, they have exactly the same experience. Employers do not ask for high school transcripts; they do not first give jobs to those students who worked hard and did well in school. And if you were an A- student and you're hired the same day as somebody who did almost nothing in school, you'll both get the same kind of job and the same kind of salary. So students learn there is no connection between being good in school and getting a good job and good pay. And just in case some kid doesn't get it, his friends will tell him, "Hey, why are you doing your homework? Are you a nerd? You don't have to do that. It doesn't count for anything."

There's another hiring pattern in this country that intensifies the problem. James Rosenbaum, a sociologist at Northwestern University, points out in a paper for the Department of Labor ["Empowering Schools and Teachers: A New Link to Jobs for the Non-College Bound"] that many companies that offer the best jobs don't hire high school graduates until they're 24 or so. They want kids to sow their wild oats with other employers. This, too, serves as a disincentive to high school kids because it forces those who have done well in school to compete for the same poor jobs as kids who've done poorly. And these businesses, if they would hire people right out of school on the basis of excellence in school, would get themselves some very good employees and provide an important incentive to students in school.

I go to a lot of business meetings, and people in the business community often ask me what they can do to help schools. The answer is they can do what businesses in many other industrialized democracies do. In England, in France and Germany and Holland and Belgium, if you did well in school, you're the first to get the apprenticeship or the



job. And if you did well in school, you'll be started at a higher salary than a mediocre student, not at the same salary. Every mother and father, every teacher, should be able to tell students that working hard and achieving will get them a better job and get them a job sooner.

Our business community needs to do the same thing. They need to go beyond adopt-a-school programs into a firm and long-term partnership with high schools. And the American Federation of Teachers intends to encourage businesses to do so. We intend to meet with the National Alliance of Business, with the Business-Higher Education Forum, with the Chamber of Commerce, with the Committee for Economic Development, with the Business Roundtable and with the unions. And we'll tell them, "Look, you're complaining about the kids you're getting -- about the fact that they don't know any math, that they can't read, that they have poor work habits. Well, you can help. You can sign an agreement with our schools to hire people on the basis of how well they did in school, taking into account the recommendations from the teachers that those students had. You can help restore the authority of teachers in this country by allowing teachers to call you and tell you about outstanding students and their job qualifications.

"And you can be public about it. Put out posters. Put it on your stationery, just as you would say you're equal opportunity employers." Why not say you're an "excellent-student employer?"

The schools' role in the system will be to provide employers with information that is accurate and timely, transcripts, for example. But how many high schools could get a transcript to an employer within one or two days? Three weeks is probably more like it, but an employer isn't going to wait three weeks to hire somebody. And when the employer

finally gets the transcript, can he understand it? Schools will have to get as reliable about providing transcripts for employers as they are about providing them for colleges. They will have to rethink their transcripts so they provide information employers need and in an easily understood form. And they will have to learn to provide them within a very short period of time.

Schools will also need guidance counselors who would be in charge of linking students with employers. And to make sure they understand the world of work, these counselors should be selected with the help of the business community. That's what was done in a few schools working with the Boston Compact, and it should be done all over.

The result will be a system where every student who is not bound for college knows that his effort, his habits of work and his actual accomplishments in school will mean the difference between being the first or last to get a job and between getting a job that's low-level or one that's more interesting, that pays more -- and that leads to something. Such a system would have a tremendous impact, and we will explore with the business community both voluntary and governmental ways to establish it.

I should point out that this system will be especially important for minority students. As we all know, there is still a lot of discrimination out there. Many minority students have felt that, even if they did well in school, they would be the last to be hired. And that feeling has turned them off from making much of an effort. All this is about to change. We are entering a period when we will have a tremendous labor shortage, one so severe that employers will not be able to turn down applicants just because they don't like the color of their skin or their ethnic background. If these applicants are qualified,

they will get promoted, have opportunities. If not, they will languish in dead-end jobs. We need to get the message to minority youngsters that the world is changing and that, if they have the skills to fill the jobs, they will get them. The system I've been suggesting here will help convince minority students about the importance of doing well in high school.

Now I'd like to talk briefly about the colleges and their relationship to this. I think that no one should enter college who is incapable of doing college-level work. That happens all the time now, and because kids know they can get into college no matter how poorly they do, they don't do much. Every mother and father and teacher in Japan, Great Britain, France, Germany, Holland can say things to students that we can't honestly say: "If you don't learn this, and if you don't do this very, very well, you will not be able to go to college." I think we ought to be able to say that, too.

I certainly am not calling for going back to a time when 5 or 10 percent of high school graduates went to college. That isn't the point. We want to make college open to everyone. Right now, unfortunately, it's open to everyone who can afford it. The main thing that keeps people out of college today is that they don't have the money to go. We should get rid of a system that keeps kids who are not able to afford it out of college. Any kid who is able to profit from college ought to be able to go whether he can afford it or not. But college is not the place to get your elementary or high-school education.

Now, I don't want to abandon the kids who do not go on to college. They should have a lifetime sum of money where they can continue their education and continue to develop their skills. It should be possible for them to qualify later to enter college. But the possibility of

going to college is an extremely important incentive for youngsters, and it doesn't work very much anymore. Except for those who go to elite institutions, most kids now know that the standards they have to meet to get into college are not very high and they meet those minimal standards, and that's it. Students need to know that they have to do more than that to get into college. And then they'll do it. Colleges shouldn't be allowed to admit students unless they have met certain standards.

Another advantage our competitor countries have is that their national or provincial education systems give them a defined curriculum. Teachers know what needs to be taught and what's tested; their students know what's expected of them. But we as a nation haven't sat down to figure out what students should know and be able to do. We have a fragmented system in which 50 states and 16,000 separate school boards separately determine how much and what kind of math and science a person gets and what the curriculum and textbooks are. To the extent we have a national curriculum and standards, they are what the private textbook and testing companies set. And because they're in the business of pleasing their customers and their customers have a hodge-podge of interests and demands, our standards are very, very low.

Our teachers are therefore given huge course syllabuses, which contain much more than a class can possibly cover. Teachers who try to follow them faithfully find they're simply stuffing facts into students' heads. That's no good, so teachers must select. But select what? What are the main ideas that are essential to cover? What should students know and be able to do? There probably isn't a teacher around who gets that kind of guidance, even though teachers' work in the classroom is now being minutely regulated and prescribed by others. If we have no

national goals, then we have no central ideas about what every student needs to know, and teachers have no basis for selecting which topics they must cover and which ones are optional. Teachers should be free to exercise judgment about methods, but we need to agree about a common core of knowledge.

Another major difference between us and these other countries is that we use multiple-choice tests to assess proficiency and they use lots of essays and problems. Students being prepared to answer essay questions get a very different kind of education, a better education.

We had these same kinds of problems with standards for teachers and teacher testing. To solve it, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was established, which is putting together the teaching knowledge base and developing standards for what proficient teachers should know and be able to do. Why can't we do the same for students? Why not establish a board to set standards for what students should know and be able to demonstrate in various fields -- English, math, science, social studies, art, music, and so forth -- and create new assessments to test how well students meet these standards? Then, students who sat for these national exams -- they would be voluntary, of course, and students could take as many or as few of them as they wished -- could say, "I am a nationally board-certified student who has achieved in the following fields." I think millions would want that kind of national recognition, especially if it were valued by employers and colleges.

The tests would be voluntary, but they would have a tremendous impact on what schools would teach. The reputation of schools and districts would be on the line. Schools work hard to get their students to do well on tests when they know students' scores will be compared

with the scores of their peers in other schools -- look at the way schools struggle to raise student grades on those idiotic standardized tests that are out there now. But this student assessment would include essay questions and not just multiple-choice. It would involve oral presentations, portfolios and demonstrations. Schools teaching to those kinds of tests would be very different from the ones we now have.

National goals for students and intelligent exams testing those goals could bring about significant improvement in student achievement by giving students some well-defined incentives. We can say to them, "What you do in school counts. If you don't meet certain standards, you're not going to go to college. If you do meet those standards, you will, regardless of money. So work hard and we'll help you." We can say the same thing to those who are not going to college: "The courses you take, the grades you get, your work habits, your relationships with your teachers and your fellow students -- all of these things also will determine what kind of job and salary you get when you graduate from high school."

Now, let's get to the tougher question of incentives for teachers, and, indeed, incentives within the entire educational system. People have been playing around with this idea for a long time, and their theory was right; it's just that the way they wanted to execute it was wrong. Look at the idea behind merit pay, for example. Some people, of course, wanted merit pay so they could reward their friends and punish their enemies. But a lot of people said, "Look, you need incentives in the system. Unless you have financial incentives, most people will not be as motivated as they could be." That general proposition is correct even though the way they tried to create incentives was wrong.

People who are talking about choice plans today are doing the same

thing: They are trying to create incentives. They're saying, "Hey, if a given school is really lousy, and if all the kids' parents pull the kids out, that's going to create a problem for the faculty there. Maybe the faculty will try to promote greater changes if they're about to lose all their customers." There's nothing wrong with that reasoning.

There are problems with choice. For instance, will parents move their kids mainly on educational or on other grounds? But there's nothing wrong with the basic notion that incentives and disincentives change people. We can reject traditional merit pay and some specific choice proposals because they're totally flawed and at the same time recognize the validity of incentives. It's easy just to say no or point out problems with an idea, but we need to propose some better way of providing the incentives and disincentives that these schemes offer.

For example, when Boston University made its Chelsea offer, we went to a lot of wonderful people and asked them to help us. We said, "It's terrible to turn over a school system to a private entity that insists on doing away with basic democratic rights, rights of public access, of disclosure and participation." Most of them agreed. They told us they didn't like giving up all these things any more than we did but that the kids in Chelsea were getting such a lousy education, they were ready to accept anything. We in public education are about to bring the American people to the point where they are going to take some desperate measures — not because they like them but because they decide there's no other choice and they can't allow kids to be sacrificed any more.

So when President Bush announced his \$500 million per year merit schools plan, I was encouraged because he didn't talk about merit pay, but, instead, about a merit schools plan; he seemed to be talking about

incentives for system-wide change. In fact, I liked that term because when Florida was involved in a merit pay fight, our own people -- Pat Tornillo and our state federation, Florida Education Association/United -- actually helped to develop a Florida merit schools plan, which still is in effect and which was in many ways the forerunner of the school-based management and shared decision making that we see in Dade County. But it seems that Bush has nothing more in mind than one of those recognition programs where, you know, a committee -- or some state officials -- look around for schools that seem to be doing well, and those schools get a plaque and a little bit of money.

A program like this won't do any harm, but it's not going to bring about any major change, either. The President's plan will recognize 1,520 teachers each year out of 2.2 million. But I believe that any management book will tell you that in order for an incentive plan to work, the prize has to be big enough to be worth the effort. And people have to have a fairly decent chance of getting it. I mean, you might pay a dollar or two for a lottery ticket when you have practically no chance of winning the \$3 million prize, but you're not going to change the way you work -- and your whole life -- because of it unless there is something wrong with you. So you need a prize that's big enough and you need a fairly good chance of getting it; otherwise, many people simply are not going to pay attention. President Bush has the idea of incentives -- just like the choice and merit pay people do. But his plan isn't going to move the system.

However, President Bush could take certain elements of his plan and reshape them -- and then he would have something that would give him the place in history he has said he wants as the "education president." He would be able to radically transform and vitalize America's public



schools and turn them from a bureaucracy, a top-down, Soviet-like command system, which clearly isn't producing results, into a competitive market system that will unleash the energies and the talents and the genius of all the people who are in it.

How would this work? Right now, President Bush could say that the \$500 million a year is enough to give every teacher in the country \$250. Well, that wouldn't do very much. Now, we would take it if he gave it to us, but I wouldn't tell him that it was going to accomplish very much. On the other hand, let's just suppose for a moment that we are going to give that money -- we'll find some fair way of doing it -- to all the staff in 10 percent of the schools. If we did that, we'd have about \$2,500 per school staff member per year. That's not bad.

But I don't want to give anybody a prize after one year. One year is not enough time to rethink what you're doing in education. It's not enough time to change your habits and try something new because, chances are, when you try something new, it won't work and you'll have to try a second thing, which also might not work, and a third thing. So by the time a year is over, you might have tried three things that didn't work and you'd be in the same shape as if you'd continued doing what you were doing in the first place -- which also doesn't work. You need a long enough period of time so people feel that, "Hey, I can take the first period of time and try things -- experiment, listen to people, go to QuEST conferences, bring some of these people with interesting ideas to our district, get people to try little experiments in one part of the school, and so forth."

So let's take that \$2,500 available each year and, instead of spending it each year, let's invest it -- not in a savings and loan association -- but someplace where it earns interest and is safe. And

after five years it will be \$15,000. That means all the staff in 10 percent of the schools will get about a \$15,000 prize after five years -- a minimum of \$15,000 -- and I'll talk about why it's a minimum in just a moment.

The goal will be to have schools enter this merit schools competition as a team that is trying to bring about the maximum possible improvement in student achievement over the five-year period. After the first five-year period is over, we'll start again -- there'll be another five-year period, and so on. We'll set up the competition in such a way that a school's chances of winning are not affected by how well or poorly its students are achieving at the beginning of the five-year period. The point will be value added, how much improvement a school makes, so every school will have an equal chance of winning. The school where, right now, the whole place is falling apart will not be competing against the top schools in the country. It will be competing against other schools like itself. All of that can be worked out.

The next thing we'll have to do is set up an assessment process. We may have to create a new one or we can take some worthwhile existing assessments that aren't exactly what we want but they'll do until we can do better. The assessment should concentrate on real things, things that we value like the ability to read a decent book, to write, to engage in a discussion of an important national or international issue, set up and solve a physical problem and show the mathematics behind it. These should be things that involve thinking and doing, not just answering multiple-choice questions. And the assessments should take place only every five years, and it may even be done on a sampling basis. These issues will have to be worked out, and they are solvable. But unless we get the assessments right, we'll get the incentives wrong;

people will be working towards the wrong things, the same narrow tests we mostly use today.

Here's one way the merit schools plan can happen. The President gets on television and tells the country about his vision of perestroika in American public education, a competitive market system within our schools. And then he'll remind people that presidents and the federal government don't run American schools; states and school boards do. He'll say that he's prepared to create this \$500 million per year fund for the merit schools competition, and he'll also set up the group to do the assessment. And after he lays out the plan and talks about the \$500 million per year fund, he'll urge people in every community in the country -- parents, teachers, administrators and business people -- to ask the school board and the union in their school district to ratify participation in the competition. Nobody goes into the competition except voluntarily, and they can enter only if the school board and the union agree.

What's involved in ratification by the board? Well, there is no point in setting up a competition to improve the schools if the schools have to go on following the same rules and regulations they are following now. They'd be forced into doing exactly what they're doing now. If these rules and regulations were working, we wouldn't need a competition; if they continue in force, we can't have one.

So first the school board has to agree to release the participating schools from all board rules and regulations, except those governing health, safety and civil rights, and let the people in those schools decide how to run them.

But changing rules and regulations won't help if you don't control the money, so the board must give the participating schools control of their school budget. And that's not all. Each year, the school board

will turn over 5 percent of the administrative and central office budget to the schools, unless they already happen to run a very lean operation because they won't need to spend that money to regulate and inspect the schools. My reasoning?

Back in the early 1960s when Martin Mayer wrote The Schools, he said that there were more supervisors, administrators, inspectors -- more central office administration -- in New York City than in all of France. This was not an opinion; he documented it. Many, many of the nation's school systems have by now gone the same way -- and just as businesses are going the other way. In some large companies today, there's one manager at headquarters for every 5,000 employees. But in many of our large school districts, there's an average of 560 students per administrator, which probably translates into one administrator for every 16-20 teachers! Sounds like there's some room for shrinkage -- especially when you consider that the main job of the central office bureaucracy is to watch the people on the front line in schools. But especially under the merit schools plan, that won't be necessary any more (I'll explain why in a moment), and as a result, individual schools will have a substantial amount of additional money from the central bureaucracy to use as they work to improve themselves.

Finally, school boards will need to agree to public school choice plans. Why? Individual schools participating in the merit schools plan are likely to be very different. The staff in one school might want to experiment with cooperative learning; in another, they'll be eager to use more technology. But some parents are not going to like what the staff in their neighborhood school are doing because it's different. If enough parents run to the board, the board will start issuing rules and regulations again, and the schools will be all the same again. So it's

important to make sure that parents don't have to send their kids to a school where they hate what's going on; they should have a choice. And that's why the school board won't have to watch your school any more -- why they won't have to hand down regulations and employ all those inspectors. Choice means they won't have to worry about making all the schools the same because if parents are unhappy, they'll be able to take their kids out and send them to another school, one that suits them.

So that's what school boards would have to agree to as a condition of participation. Now what about the unions? They'd have to agree to grant waivers of contract provisions to the teachers in the participating schools if those teachers decided that a particular provision got in the way of what they wanted to do to improve the school. The only contract provisions that would be off limits to the teachers would be those dealing with health, safety and civil rights.

Say, for instance, one of the competing schools needs a math teacher and it simply can't find one. The staff might decide to take some of the budget and try to win back a great math teacher who left to work for a local computer company. They might have to pay him a little -- or a lot -- more than he got before, which might not be allowed by the overall union contract, but they'll be able to get a waiver and do it because they decided it's necessary to improve their school, to win.

The faculty may also start worrying about the couple of teachers who are pretty weak. It might have bothered them before, but there was nothing they could do about it. After all, they didn't hire or promote these weak faculty. But now it's really going to bother them because the performance of every member of the school team will be important to the outcome. So they'll probably get organized to help out teachers who need help and, if necessary, help them find non-school employment -- and

before you know it, many, many schools will have a peer review and intervention program like the one initiated by the Toledo Federation of Teachers.

The amount of money I mentioned earlier was a minimum of \$15,000, but it could be more. Many school boards won't want to give up their direct involvement in operating the schools. And many teacher unions will say they don't want to do it. So maybe only half the schools in the country will decide to enter. If half enter, the prize will be \$30,000 instead of \$15,000. If only one-quarter of the schools enter, the prize will be \$60,000 per individual. In other words, when you enter, you won't really know how big the prize will be. It could be as much as \$150,000 or \$200,000 per individual, but it can't be lower than \$15,000.

Crazy? A lot of people are going to say so, and they'll raise a lot of questions, many of them legitimate. How about the school that figures out how to get a lot of its lowest scoring students to quit in order to win? Or the one that entices some high-scoring students from other schools to come in? Former Governor of Georgia Lester Maddox once said that the only way to improve the prisons is to get a better class of prisoners. So you might get some schools that try to reduce liabilities instead of adding value, because we all know that competition and market systems may bring out the bad as well as the good in people.

Obviously, there will have to be a very careful monitoring of this, with stiff penalties for cheating -- this merit schools plan wouldn't tolerate the kind of official cheating that goes on now routinely in districts over, say, standardized test scores reporting. And there will be other problems besides monitoring for cheaters. What do you do with teachers who are only there during half the time of the merit schools

competition and then leave? What about pupil mobility? I am not pretending there aren't problems and questions to address.

But please remember that we do not have the alternative of keeping our present model of education. We're going to get parent boards telling us what to do or John Silber dictating or a private company, but we aren't going to hold on to the current model; it's going to be abandoned because it doesn't work. And we'll either get some form of radical privatization where it's likely that schools will be run even more like an authoritarian factory system where teachers will be treated like assembly-line workers following other people's orders, or we're going to have a school that's run by teachers and principals and other staff who are closest to the kids -- with accountability and parent choice, because we can't ask people to turn the schools over to us without having these safeguards. They've got to be sure that we're trying to do the right thing. And we are going to be trying to do the right thing because there's a lot in it for us -- and not just financially. It's the best hope we have of teachers being treated like professionals and being able to grow professionally and being able to concentrate on student learning instead of on all those idiotic, destructive, non-educational things that now intrude on teaching and learning every day.

I believe that it's essential for a national merit schools plan to be voluntary; the federal government can't coerce a local school or district to participate. But I can also imagine a plan in which there wouldn't only be winners, there'd also be losers. The most miserable schools ought to be closed. Their students could be dispersed to other schools or the failed school could be reopened with a new plan of education devised by a new school staff -- that has happened before. I

can even imagine the staff of winning schools taking over the failed school, in the same way as a successful company may take over a firm that has failed. But teachers from the failed school should be back on the hiring line explaining to schools that are considering hiring them why the failure of their previous school wasn't their doing. And many of them might even be hired by their old school, now reopened and run by the people in the successful school. After all, a successful business that takes over its failed competitor often hires the competitor's employees because they have talent but it wasn't used. I can imagine all this because we have to face reality: There are failing schools and people won't or shouldn't take it much longer, especially not the faculty in those schools because, more often than not, they are powerless to turn around that situation, a situation that victimizes them as well as their students.

We have to reserve those issues for now because participation in the merit schools plan must be voluntary if it is to get off the ground and succeed. And the more volunteers there are, the more successful it will be and the fewer failing schools we will have because for the first time the people in schools will be able to do something about the problems in their schools instead of merely following the tired and failed prescriptions of distant bureaucrats or legislators.

So what are the chances that this merit schools proposal will happen? Well, a great deal will depend on you. There's a chance that the President of the United States will pick this up. And if the President doesn't, it may be that members of Congress will say, "That sounds like a good idea. We won't put \$500 million into it, but we'll pass some legislation that will allow a substantial number of demonstration projects." There's a chance that the top people in the



business community will support it because they'll say, "This looks like the same system that we've got, the one that works for this country in other areas." It may be that a couple of governors will like it and try it in their state. Or a consortium of districts might get together, pitch in \$250 a year per school staff member and do it voluntarily. Or some private foundation might say, "This is terrific. We will set it up and offer it to this community." Or you could even do it in some large cities. I strongly believe that in one form or another, or one place or another, this is going to happen.

Now, what happens to the union? I was at a meeting recently where somebody got up and asked, "Why should a school board do this? What's going to happen to the board?" And I said, "Well, what's going to happen to the union? Everybody is going to have to change. The role of administration and management is going to change and so is the role of the union."

Certainly our union knows how to change. It has changed, it has taken on new roles and taken great risks because we know how troubled public education is and we are committed to it and will help save it. So many of you here have done that and become stronger and more attractive to your members for it. And what I'm talking about is not very dissimilar from what the United Auto Workers is doing in the Saturn Project. For the first time, workers and management will be involved in designing the whole process. For the first time, workers will be working in teams instead of isolated on the assembly line. And these workers will be paid less on an hourly basis than other workers because they'll be involved in quarterly profit sharing. So if the car sells, they'll make more than other workers.

They'll be working in teams, partly because you make a better

product that way and enjoy your work more, and partly so they can help out a colleague who isn't working so well. If he doesn't shape up, he'll get a chance on another team. But if he can't make the grade on a number of teams, he'll be out.

When I asked my friends in the UAW, "How can the union be involved in getting a union member out, instead of just protecting him?" they said, "If we keep people who can't do the work, none of us will have a job. And we won't have a union, either. Because more and more Japanese cars will be sold." We are talking about the future of public education in this country, just as the UAW and GM are talking about the future of the automobile industry. And when you're in a life-or-death situation, you do things that you otherwise wouldn't do because you don't have to. The issue is survival.

We can't predict exactly what will happen if we pursue the reforms I'm calling for. But I can guarantee there will be a role for the union. For one, we know that the only places where there is real reform going on now are districts where there's a strong union. It couldn't have happened otherwise. And it's also the case that there will still be issues of unfairness and discrimination, questions of testing, Supreme Court decisions, etc., for the union to handle. And the union will be around to help people in the schools compete -- to give them information and training and make sure the rules are fair. The need for the union will be greater. But things won't be the same -- and yet that's going to be true whether we take this step or not. The question is whether we'll choose to act or simply let things happen.

The chances we'll be taking will be very much like the chances that we took with collective bargaining. We took a big chance then. There we were, a small minority union, and we came out for a system that gave

exclusive representation to the majority union in a school district. We did that when we had 50,000 members in the whole United States of America. It was very gutsy and it was very risky. I don't think anyone here today is sorry we took that chance. Now it's time for us to take some risks again. And the stakes this time are much bigger. They are the future of public education in our country.

Last year, I visited Poland twice. Poland, you know, used to be the bread basket of Europe. Now, as the result of its command economy, it's very poor. When I came back the first time, I read a little item in the Wall Street Journal. At first, I thought it was a Polish joke, but it was a real interview with a Polish economist. And I quickly realized that it was also an American education joke. So please translate.

The reporter who is interviewing the economist about economic conditions in Poland asks, "Do you think it's really possible to lift the Polish economy from this terrible state of poverty to a state of prosperity?" And the Polish economist answers, "Yes, I think it is. As a matter of fact, there are two ways to do it. There's a natural way and there's a miraculous way." The reporter asks, "Well, all right, what's the natural way?" "The natural way," says the economist, "would be for a band of angels to descend from heaven and lift Poland into prosperity." "If that's the natural way," the reporter asks, "what's the miraculous way?" And the economist answers, "The miraculous way would be if the Poles did it themselves."

We have no band of angels to lift our schools into effectiveness. And it would indeed be a miracle if we did it ourselves. But a miracle is the only thing we can count on.

Thank you very much.

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