

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AFL-CIO

Shanker Speech

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Over the last couple of years, the overriding issue that we've had across the country has been the issue of public and private schools, the issue of whether there will be public monies used for non-public schools, and as you know, you came very close on this day to getting a Regents' vote on that issue.

You know that President Bush, before he was elected, said that he was opposed to using government monies for private schools. After he was elected, he made a very, very strong statement, after inaugurated as a matter of fact, saying that public monies were for public schools and those who wanted to send their kids to private schools ought to pay for them.

He then had a White House Conference on Choice in Public Education, a conference that I was invited to, and I remember seeing the various non-public school people there very angry that the theme of the conference which the President decided was on choice in public schools and did not include private schools.

And a short time after that, it's clear that the President's advisors told him that whatever his personal convictions were, this was a good political issue. It took very little time for President Bush and candidate Bush,

both of whom were very strong on this issue, to change and to come out with a new kind of logic, that "Oh, I'm still just for public monies for public schools, but you see, what I mean by a public school is any school that gets public money."

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: And once we give them public money, they will be public schools." That's the logic that enabled the President to save some face with that kind of tricky language.

Well, we did a great job, and I want to thank all of you because we certainly didn't do it in Washington alone; we did it all across the country in contacting members of Congress and especially members of the Senate, but we did get an overwhelming vote in the Senate against the voucher proposal that was there. But that doesn't end the fight.

I think we've got to look at a couple of things, and the main one is that this fight is not going to be won or lost in just one place. It's popping up all over the place.

As President Bush and Secretary Lamar Alexander announced their "America 2000" plan, they urged each state to adopt the plan, so there's a "Colorado 2000" and there's

a "California 2000" and there's an "Oklahoma 2000", and the idea is that when a state develops, then the President flies in and there's a big thing with the Governor and with mayors and with other politicians. So lots of states are doing it, and the President flies in, makes a speech in those states and urges them to go for private school choice within the state.

And so a few months ago, we narrowly defeated a private school choice measure in the legislature of Pennsylvania. There is now a petition drive to have a referendum on school vouchers in the state of California. There is a clever proposal floating around in Delaware which essentially says that school districts would provide a voucher for one-half the money that it costs them to educate a child if the child is taken out of public school and sent to private school. The idea is to convince taxpayers that if all the kids would leave public schools and enter private schools that parents would be happy and that the public would save one-half the money.

So we've got all of that pressure and the most important thing to see is just why that pressure is there.

Now, you might think that the business community, since these are private schools that the President is talking about, and since business people are in the private

sector, you might think that the business community in this country would be out front trying to push this. Well, they're not.

If you look at the education statements of the National Alliance of Business, of the Business Round Table, of the National Chamber of Commerce -- you name the group -- none of them had choice on there a year ago. Now with the President calling them in and pleading with them, they have very mild statements about choice such as "Choice is no panacea but perhaps it would be worth trying." This is after a lot of pressure by the President of the United States to get support.

The support from the business community has been so weak that the Heritage Foundation several weeks ago announced that it was going to start going to the boards of directors and the companies that pay dues to these organizations to ask why they are either opposed or rather unenthusiastic about choice.

But that gives us a clue, that the problem we face all across the country comes from the White House and it comes from the President of the United States. And whatever happens in this campaign, it may be that one day Bill Clinton will deliver a speech that's not as good as the one that he gave today; it may be that some days President Bush

will look a little better, and maybe all sorts of things will move back and forth as they usually do in a campaign. But remember just one thing -- that whoever is in the White House not only has the power to veto legislation, not only has the power to lead and to inspire, but also has the power of the bully pulpit to get people in 50 states doing things that that President advocates.

And early on it became very clear, we knew what we had in President Bush. Just yesterday in vetoing the tax bill, one of his strong statements was for private school choice as a major program. So that is something that he is going to be pushing throughout the campaign.

There were only a few of the candidates on the Democratic side who were explicitly opposed, strongly opposed, and gave us a very clear response, and Bill Clinton is the only one of those who is still in the race. And we didn't have to twist arms. As a matter of fact, I heard the first Democratic Presidential debate in Detroit at the AFL-CIO convention. The questioner threw that to all the candidates and Clinton answered very, very strongly and very firmly.

So remember that for the next four or eight or 12 years, whatever this next election will determine, that as we have various popularity ups and downs in the campaign,

that one of the things that's riding on this is whether we continue to have a long period of time where the President of the United States uses his influence to try to destroy public education in America by devoting public funds not to public schools that desperately need them but to take them out of public schools and send them to private schools.

That's the key issue, that's the life and death issue for us, and that's the one that we need to be looking at. I don't think you're going to see President Bush change on that and you're not going to see Clinton change on that. For people in our communities who care about schools, we can't tell 'em how to vote 'cause there are other issues out there, and there are other issues out there for our members as well. But for those of us who believe in public education, this is a very, very important one, and as an organization, it's the big one and we need to keep spreading that message, keep holding hands and keep bringing people back to this issue. We've got a very, very good chance if we've got a President in the White House who's going to keep pushing this, that we're going to get it in one or two or three states. Once it's there, other states are going to say, "Well, if they can do it there, why don't we do it here?"

You know, we Democrats control the House of

Representatives, and we have a very good chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, Bill Ford of Michigan, who's got as near a perfect record on labor and education issues as you can imagine. And I had to read in the papers one morning that Bill Ford and his committee had decided to support a very substantial experiment in private school vouchers as part of their bill.

And when I called Bill Ford to find out why he did something like that, he said, "Well, the White House said that if we would agree to this experiment that they would promise that nobody would get up on the floor and push for a further voucher movement." In other words, we had some of our best friends compromising on the issue and giving on it because they were afraid that if they didn't compromise, it would be worse than that.

Now, that's the kind of thing that we're faced with, and that's just a central, very central, issue.

Now, Tom touched on another very important one, and that relates to our 20 years and that goes back to relations with the NEA. We don't have good news in the sense that something has happened and is final but we do have some very good indications on the national level.

For the first time in this voucher fight and on one or two others there has really been very, very close

cooperation between the staffs of the NEA and the AFT, keeping each other informed, working on Senators and Representatives, and working almost as a single team. That was very important.

Also, a month ago, the NEA and the AFT cosponsored, together with Ted Sizer, a national conference in Washington where we brought people from all over the country, a limited number of people, but nevertheless people who were working to try to reform and restructure their schools. That was broadcast several times on C-Span and it was an indication of willingness on the part of both organizations to enter into a cooperative relationship and not to try to do things alone in order to capture credit but rather to try to create a feeling of some national cooperation.

Tom has informed you that the two international organizations will merge. The merger agreement is quite definite. They will merge next January. Tom had the number wrong. We now have eight million in IFTU, they have 12 million in WCOTP, so the merged organization will be an organization of 20 million members around the world. That would not have happened unless the NEA and the AFT felt a certain level of comfort with each other. It's a very important development for teachers, especially in

developing countries. You know, those are places where if you speak up and say something that the government doesn't like, you may find that you're not alive the next day or you may find that you're in jail for a long period of time or you may find that your organization is no longer registered and therefore nobody will deal with it.

Teachers will now have the largest such organization in the entire world. There are groups like that that represent metal workers and other types of workers. We will be the largest and I'm sure quite effective.

And as Tom pointed out, the other hopeful sign is that the NEA is going through a whole year process of rethinking their relationship with both us and with the AFL-CIO. I think that we're not necessarily moving to a merger that's going to take place in six months or a year, but I think that we are moving a lot closer to a time when we're not in a competitive status. There may very well be some state by state mergers or they will lift their restriction on local mergers or there will be some agreements not to rate each other and to do more cooperative things together. But for all of us who have wanted a single, united teacher organization in America, the things that have been going on in recent months and

over the last year are very positive signs of an almost complete abandonment of the traditional hostilities of a period of very great cooperation.

There's another sign -- New Mexico just got a collective bargaining, was just signed by the Governor a short time ago, and instead of --

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

AL SHANKER: When we think of the problems we have, just remember that about half the states still don't even have collective bargaining. New Mexico got it. The usual thing though, is the AFT and the NEA would be figuring out how do we go in and kill each other. The first thing that happened is that both sides got together and said, "Well, you people really have most of the folks over there. Why don't you take that? We'll support you in that one. And, "Here's one where we don't have anything. Maybe we'll think about going after it together." And there's discussion of that.

As I say, there's nothing there in writing, there's nothing that you can say is definite, but it is pretty definite. There's a very changed attitude and a different relationship, and I think that in the year to come that there will be some more good news along that front, and we certainly need it.

Now I'd like to spend a few more minutes dealing with this public/private issue because it's not going to go away. It's not going to go away in New York state and it isn't going to go away elsewhere. And so we need to be armed in dealing with this issue.

There are basically two arguments that are used in support of why we should give aid to non-public schools. There are a lot of arguments, but there are two that you hear most frequently.

One of them is that public education is a monopoly. We don't have to worry about losing customers or gaining customers, and therefore we aren't trying to do a good job. And therefore, if we were in danger of losing customers to private schools, we would do a better job and the private schools would do a better job, too, because we would probably start trying to steal customers back from them or take some of theirs and that competition would shape up both sides.

Now, in theory that's correct, but it doesn't actually work that way because it assumes that most people will select schools on the basis of academic excellence. That turns out to be a theory that is not true.

Minnesota has had a public school choice plan in effect now for about five years, and there have been an

ample number of surveys to find out why it is that people move their kids from one school to another.

Reason number one is convenience. Reason number two is convenience, and reason number three is convenience.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: If the school is convenient to your going and coming from work, that's a very important reason. If the school will let you drop your kids off earlier and pick 'em up later, that's a very important reason. If the school has a good athletic team, the kids want to go there and parents will often send their kids to the school where they want to go. And by the way, lots of kids and parents choose schools where you can get good marks and not work very hard. That's important, too.

Yes, there are some who want a school that's going to be very challenging, but that isn't 50 percent or even 40 or 30 or 20; it's more like five or ten percent who look for schools like that. And so if you had that competition for students, the successful schools would be those that provided the things that parents and kids want. Since not very many of them are looking for a place that's going to make them work harder and study more and do more homework, et cetera, those are not the schools that are going to win out.

Now, it seems that the second important thing that we need to get out there are the figures that I shared with some of you at the [unintelligible] conference, when you saw a lot of charts and graphs. You might very well have flipped through a copy of "The American Educator" a few issues back.

So let me summarize. When the mathematics scores came out last June, all the papers covered the fact that Washington, D.C. was near the bottom and other states were near the top and everybody looked to see where their state was in the rankings. There wasn't a single newspaper in the country that carried the story that in addition to comparing state by state that this also compared private schools and public schools. And when I went down to a briefing session and they had a book of all the indices -- it was close to two inches thick -- and I started flipping through this and I noticed that for the first time they released comparisons of public and private schools, what I found was really shocking.

What I found was that if you look at the kids about to graduate high school, that all of them knew how to add, subtract, multiply and divide whole numbers -- like 99.5 percent of them were able to do that, public and private schools.

If you go to the next one and you take add, subtract, multiply and divide fractions and decimals, you're a little bit lower; you're around the 86 percent range.

Then when you get what's considered to be seventh grade level, which is a little bit of algebra and little bit of stuff with geometric figures and some verbal problems, that comes down to about 46 percent.

And then when you go to the last level, which is those who really know enough high school math to be able to do some college math when they go into college, only five percent were able to do that.

Now, when they separated out public and private, those who knew the basics, there was the same, 99 percent, close to a hundred percent, for both public and private. And the same thing was true in the next column.

Now, by the time you got to the seventh grade level, the private schools were just over 50 percent and the public schools just under, but they were about six points from each other, very, very close.

When you got to the highest category, five percent of the public school kids made it and only four percent of the private school kids made it. There's a higher dropout rate in public schools, and when you take that into

account, the same percentage graduate high school having learned high school mathematics. A very low percentage, four or five percent, but it was the same percentage.

So I started wondering whether perhaps some of my assumptions have been wrong, 'cause I had always assumed, and most people out there assume, that kids in private schools score better. Now, you remember Lester Maddox, the governor of Georgia, and you remember that -- that's right; he deserves some hisses --

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: -- but when he was first elected governor, somebody said to him, "Governor, you got a really messy system in your prisons here. You got the worst prisons in the country. What are you going to do about it?"

And he said, "Well, if you want better prisons, you have to get a better class of prisoner."

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: And I thought that the private schools had a better class of prisoner, and that's why they were doing better. We know that about 75 percent of the private schools you can't get in unless you take a test, and if you do get in and refuse to do your homework or if you're disruptive, they kick you out. So they don't have

to deal with the same student population.

I started wondering well, was I wrong? Do they really have a select student population?

And so I went back into the government figures and I found out that they sure do have a select student population because -- I won't give you all the numbers, but just an indication -- the level of education of parents. Forty-seven and a half percent of the fathers of children in private school are college graduates -- 47 and one-half percent of the kids in private schools have fathers who are college graduates. Only 31 percent of the kids in public school. That's a 16 percent difference.

Now, being a college graduate means that you make thousands and thousands of dollars. It means that you've got a different kind of home. It means that you have different health care. It means that you travel and have different vacations.

On the other hand, only seven percent of the parents of kids in private school were dropouts, whereas 14 percent of the kids' parents who went to public schools were dropouts.

So you see, there's a huge bunch of parents, much bigger bunch, who are college graduates with kids in private school, much bigger bunch of dropout parents of

kids in public school.

When I went through those numbers, there was no question that they had a select group of youngsters.

Now, when I looked at still another bunch of numbers, what I found was if you compared all the youngsters whose parents had graduated college, you got exactly the same scores. Didn't make any difference whether they went to public school or private school, the scores were exactly the same.

A week from now the new NAPE scores are going to come out in science. I haven't seen them yet, but I believe that these NAPE scores are going to show the same results with respect to public and private schools. Three years ago there were results in reading and in history and social science which showed the same thing.

I believe that we now have four or five sets of examinations, or about to have, which show that in spite of the fact that private schools have all sorts of advantages that they are not doing a better job when it comes to student outcomes.

Now, I've done a job meeting with the business community. I've gotten this out to governors. I was down speaking to all of the chairs of legislative education committees across the country just a few months ago.

When they see this stuff, it changes their attitude, because a lot of them feel, "Gee, there are some really poor kids in this neighborhood and if only we gave them a chance to have the same good education that the kid does in a parochial school down on the corner." They feel that they're doing something for somebody, and when they see these results, they have second thoughts.

Now, I can do that with business people, I can do it with Congressmen, I can do it with legislators. You ought to be doing it. You ought to be doing it with your own members so that they could talk to their relatives and friends. This is a very important part of the political fight that we are in, and a lot of these fights can't be carried by a couple of legislative people or a couple of officers. They basically have to be carried by winning over lots of people. I bet if we took a poll today almost anywhere in the country and asked one or two thousand people out there, "In general, students learn more in private school than in public school," the overwhelming majority of people, including our own members, would probably answer that question, "Yes, they do" -- and they'd be wrong.

So when we've got stuff that's as powerful as this is, let's not be afraid of using a couple of charts.

They're not difficult and they're not complicated. We should go out there and spread those ideas.

Now I would like to spend a little bit of time just sharing some of the dangerous ideas -- I hope they're not too dangerous; not as dangerous as the parachute or the Coleman --

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: Well, if he could tell that one, I can tell this one.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: [Laughter.] This one appeared, actually, in the "Harvard Business Review" a few months ago and so it must be a serious story.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: It's a story about a man who drove up to a gas station to get some gas, and as the fellow was pumping the gas, he looked into the car and he saw three penguins sitting in the back seat.

So the attendant said to the driver, "Hey, Mister, do you know that you've got three penguins sitting in the back seat of the car?"

And the driver says, "Yeah, I know."

And the fellow says, "Well, how'd they get there?"

He says, "Well, damned if I know. I just got in

the car and took off. I turn around and I saw three penguins sitting there."

He said -- the attendant said, "What are you going to do with them??"

He says, "I don't know. You got any ideas?"

The attendant says, "Well, why don't you take 'em to the zoo?"

The fellow says, "That's a good idea. I'll do that." And he drove off.

The next morning the same car pulled up for gas. The attendant looked in the back seat. The three penguins are still there, but now they're all wearing sunglasses.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: He says to the driver, "I thought you were going to take 'em to the zoo."

The driver said, "I did, and they liked it so much that I thought I would take them to the beach today."

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: Well, I hope we're not going to be talking past each other that way.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: But one of the things I just shared with you in going through these numbers was that performance is still very, very low -- that four or five

percent at that end, and so I'd like to spend a couple of minutes thinking about what it is that needs to be changed if we're going to alter that performance.

Now, one of the things we've been doing for the last seven or eight years -- I have been, many of you have been -- is we've been radically rethinking what schools do, and we've been asking ourselves, "How do we turn students off? How can we do things that are better?" And we've been trying very hard.

And certainly we ought to continue in some of the experiments that are on their way now because -- well, people get very disappointed and frustrated when they don't get fast results. One of the things I like very much about Bill Clinton's speech this morning is the recognition that we didn't get into this mess overnight and we're not going to cure everything overnight, that there isn't any educational program that could be plugged in which will give you results in one or two or three years.

Basically, most of the people who are in high school have already gone through the old system, and you won't know if anything new works until you start it with the kindergarteners, first and second graders as they go through something that's new. And when you've got something new, it's going to have bugs in it, so the first

group isn't really going to get the best of it, either, because we're going to be rethinking it. So it takes a good piece of time, and I don't think that we should be discouraged because we didn't get instant results. We shouldn't expect them. And we shouldn't over-promise.

But there is something that we have not, I think, concentrated on, and that is this: Suppose that we were in business, suppose we were manufacturing something, whatever it is -- clothing, watches, radios, television sets, cars, anything. And suppose that we were in competition with five or six or seven or eight other outfits, and suppose that those other outfits were producing a much better product than we were, and we were starting to really get into serious trouble. What would we do?

Well, I have no doubt, absolutely no doubt, that we would take a close look at what these successful competitors were doing, and we would try to steal some of their people, maybe. We would certainly try to steal some of their ideas. We would try to steal those ideas that we thought were making the difference between their doing a better job and our not doing such a good job.

And so when I started thinking this way, one of the things I thought was that gee, most of these other systems around the world that are more successful than ours

are really pretty traditional. So while I would like and hope we keep working toward a system that looks and feels different, what these other systems have shown, what the Canadians and the Germans and the French and the Dutch and the Swedes and the Japanese and others have shown, is that you can in a pretty traditional system do things that bring about results that are substantially better than the results that we produce.

This is not an argument for trying to do something even better than that, but it does mean that we don't have to sit and feel frustrated, saying that nothing that is traditional works, because it's not working, but we haven't yet developed something that is so different and what are we going to do?

Now, first let me get to the question: Are these other systems really producing so much better?

If you have any doubt, there are of course these international comparisons and believe me, in spite of what's been said about accuracies and inaccuracies, they are pretty accurate. Certainly they are for 13-year-olds when all the kids are still in school in these countries. If you measure 17- or 18-year-olds, they're not so accurate because there are different leaving rates.

But I would very strongly recommend that you get

hold of this book. It's put out by the National Endowment for the Humanities and it's called "National Tests" and what's in here are questions from tests that are given in other countries. These are not the tests that are given to all students. These are the tests that are given to students who are about to graduate high school and who want to go to college. These are the tests they have to pass if they want to go to college.

Now, here's one from France. It says, "The candidate will write an essay on one of the following three topics, and you're to take four hours to write the essay." Now, topic one is -- takes about a page here. The topic is "the evolution of domestic policy in the Soviet Union from 1953 until today."

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: And then there are a list of dates -- '54, Khrushchev becomes general secretary; '56, 20th Century Congress of the Communist Party, riots in Georgia; '58, Pasternak is prohibited from accepting the Nobel Prize, et cetera. In other words, it gives you a bunch of clues, things that happened, and then it says, "Okay, now take four hours and write an essay on the evolution of domestic policy in the Soviet Union during that period."

But you didn't have to answer that question.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: But that was the easiest one.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: Now, here's another one:

"Presidential power in the constitution and domestic and foreign policy of the United States since 1945." And then it lists each President, his party, and the term of office, and then you've got your four hours to write on that.

Here's a map of the United States. It says, "Using your own knowledge, on a map below identify the principal industrial areas of the United States and define their essential features. Set up a systematic key to the map on a separate sheet of paper."

Now, let me move to a different country -- move to Germany.

Why -- and, well, let's see -- here's one: "Three hours allowed. Answer any four questions. All questions carry equal weight. One, why and with what justification is the Presidential election of 1800 spoken of as a revolution? Two, why did Virginians" -- yeah, this is in Germany -- "why did Virginians dominate the Presidency from 1789 to 1825? Three, assess the extent and significance of opposition to western expansion in the pre-Civil War period? Four, quote, 'It was necessary to free the slaves

to win the war' The war was not fought to free the slaves'. Unquote. Discuss this judgment of the Civil War."

Well -- here's one: "Assess the contribution to American identity of one of the following -- A, Louis Armstrong; B, Henry Ford; C, Jesse Owens; D, Elvis Presley."

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: "Why was evangelical Protestantism so important a force in American life and what effects did it have in the period 1800 to 1860 or 1900 to 1960?"

Well, I said this wasn't for all the youngsters, but remember, only five percent of our youngsters -- that is, five percent of the 70 percent who graduate from high school were -- could do that top level in mathematics. The exams that I just read to you are passed by 30 percent of the entire cohort -- 30 percent of all the kids who are 19 in Germany pass an examination like this. And over 30 percent in France pass an examination like this.

So let me go back to the tactic that I talked about a few minutes ago and raise the question: What is it that these other countries do that's different than what we do that might play some role in the success of their schools?

First, let me say that not one other country in the industrial world that does better than we do uses vouchers or choice as a way of promoting excellence or competition. I'm not saying that they don't in some cases have some support for kids to go to non-public schools; some of them do have such support.

But I'm saying that it is not competition. In those countries, private schools don't try to take kids from public schools and public schools don't -- they don't move back and forth. Kids whose parents want to give them a religious education send 'em to those schools and they in some cases get some support. So we don't have that.

What are some of the differences?

I'm going to go quickly through some of them just to give you a notion as to what you might look at, and then I'm going to dwell on one or two of them to discuss them in a little greater depth.

One of the things that no other country has is a school board.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter, followed by applause.]

AL SHANKER: Local school board. And I submit to you that one of the things that prevents good education from going on in the United States is the politics. See, along with school boards goes this tremendous amount of

money for administration and supervision which exists in no other country, tremendous bureaucracies. Along with it goes the notion that teachers very often don't want to try something new because you never know when you're going to get a new superintendent or a new principal's going to be put in there or you're going to get a new school board election and whatever you started a couple of years ago and devoted a lot of energy to all of a sudden is going to be whipped around, and also that the things that you're doing are just subject to a lot of rules and regulations every time a board meets.

So one of the things we need to deal with is how is it possible to keep school boards but to keep them out of the business of running schools? That is, to have them make policy in the long term but --

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

AL SHANKER: -- but out of an interference role?

I understand there's going to be a report coming out any day now from the 20th Century Fund and I eagerly look forward to reading that. One of the issues on the American agenda is the question of how to modify the rules and regulations under which school boards operate, and we need to look at that very carefully.

A second one that I do want to spend some time on

has to do with curriculum and assessment.

All of these other countries -- practically all of them -- have a national curriculum and a national assessment system. Now that runs counter, and a lot of teachers don't like that because they feel if there is a national curriculum it will obviously be more restrictive than not having one. If you've got state and local curriculum and if you've got a lot of leeway, basically teachers can do more of what they want and they're not required to do certain things.

And that, of course, is nice because it gives some freedom to teachers, but it has a very big down side to it.

(END OF SIDE 1 OF TAPE)

(SIDE 2 OF TAPE BEGINS)

AL SHANKER: One is if you don't have a defined curriculum, you're not going to get good textbooks. The way textbooks are now made up is the textbook companies look at five or six or seven states and they look at the curriculum in each of those states and then they put together a composite textbook so that it could be sold in five or six different states which have six different ways of teaching something. That's why the textbooks are no good -- because essentially they are not made with a view of teaching a single curriculum which has been put together

in some sort of a sensible way. Rather, it's a multiple-purpose product about how can we get out a book which we only have to manufacture once which will somehow satisfy all sorts of different requirements?

They are thick, they are fat, they are boring, they are things put together by a committee, they are inaccurate, and that's something that we have that's not particularly good.

Secondly, where you have a national curriculum, teacher education consists of educating teachers to teach the curriculum. Now that's a radical notion --

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: -- but in the United States, when you are trained, or when you go to teacher education, you can't be trained to teach the curriculum because there is no curriculum. There's a different one in each community and in each state, and so all you can get are some general courses.

Now, this whole issue is now before the Congress. The Senate has already passed legislation to set up a national board for curriculum and assessment standards. Now, it is not going to create a curriculum if this passes, but it will set certain standards, to say this, a set of assessments, meets high standards; this particular

curriculum meets certain standards. So you might end up not with 50 or with 15,000; you might end up with three or four.

What can we do meanwhile?

Well, while we're waiting, instead of having each and every teacher have to try to invent things, we really ought to be using the best that are out there, and the best curriculum materials today come from California. I urge you also to look at their curriculum frameworks in math, in English language arts, in history and there are others that are coming out.

Some of the old ones before the Regents got softened in New York state were very good.

The old Regents exams, the advanced placement exams, the international baccalaureate -- all of these are extremely important.

Now I want to address that question for a minute of what happens -- I mean, isn't this going to be restrictive, and how should teacher feel about it?

Well, about a month ago the AFT executive council met and we had with us a man who's just co-authored a very interesting piece of research. His name is Harold Stevenson. He wrote an article some time back for "The American Teacher" in which he described how teachers in

Asia all develop common lessons and they work on the same lesson over and over again -- he called it "polishing the stone". They work to perfect it. They constantly meet to ask, "Well, what didn't go over? What do we have to do differently?"

And Sandy Feldman, who was at the meeting, raised her hand and said, "You know, American teachers might not like that because American teachers view teaching as something like they are artists and there is the canvas in front of them and here are the paints and there's a blank canvas." And Stevenson had a very interesting response. He said, "Asian teachers look upon teaching as being a musician. You are a pianist and someone gives you a piece of music, and you play that piece of music. Now, there are different ways of playing it, but it's that piece of music that you're playing."

Now, I would strongly recommend that as you move into school-based management and as you have more and more of a voice in what to do that you see whether teachers within a district could not agree on a common curriculum so that there's a much closer relationship between what a teacher does in one room and another, in one school and another, in one grade and another.

One of the things that you find in all these other

countries is that there is a connectiveness between what happens from one place to another which does not exist in the United States. And it's especially a problem in the United States because our kids move around more, and as they move from one place to another, there may be no connection between what they learn in years 1, 2 and 3 and what they learn later on.

Another thing that you have control over which is really rather simple is an idea that we have gotten from some of our competitors. It is quite usual in most of these other countries, and this is true in earlier grades as well as later grades, to try to break schools down so that they are smaller units. Even if you have a huge school that's got --

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

AL SHANKER: -- thousands of kids, that doesn't mean that's got to run as one school. And the idea is to make students and teachers be part of a community so they know each other's names. They know that they don't feel that they're like in New York City where you can, you know, walk for blocks and never meet anybody that you know. A school should not be a place where you feel that anonymity, where you feel that anything you say or do you can get away with because nobody knows you. It should be a lot more

like a small town where you don't throw something down because someone may be looking at you from the window and might not like what you're doing.

And furthermore, in most of these countries at some stage or other a team of teachers remains with the same youngsters for more than one year -- often for two years or three years, so that the youngsters and the teachers get to know each other and get to feel a sense of mutual responsibility.

Now, those are important things. There are some things we can't do much about ourselves, like what's going to happen with school boards, but some of these things that we can do.

And I want to touch on one other item that's very different, and that's the whole issue of grouping youngsters and tracking them. And we do it very differently. All these other countries at a certain age will track kids according to what their achievement is.

In Germany it's the youngest. They start in grade 5 with a very rigid tracking. In other countries it's later.

Now, in the United States we claim that we don't track much, and in some ways we don't, but basically when do we start tracking? In the first grade in kindergarten,

that's right; we start putting youngsters into reading groups. There is no other country in the world that divides kids in kindergarten or the first grade. At least for the first four years in every other country in the world, all of the youngsters are kept together and are pressured to do exactly the same thing. Our testing mechanisms are not accurate enough and you really can't tell at that age who's going to go a little behind and forward. All of them are pushed to do the same work and to the same extent.

So we claim that we don't track, but we actually do, and we need to take a close look at that.

One final point that I want to mention is the issue of student stakes. Somebody's going to win the pool.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: I want you to know that I had all sorts of offers before I came up here.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: [Laughter.] Now, if anybody doesn't know what all that laughter is about, come up and see me after this. I'll --

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: [Laughter.] Well, maybe I'll go on a while longer.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: There are many forms of torture.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: One of the themes that I've written about and touched on has to do with something that exists in other countries which does not really exist here now, and that is the notion that in every other country students and their parents know that there are stakes for failing and there are stakes for succeeding. One of the terrible things that we witnessed in the United States is that almost every form of accountability says, "Let's hold schools accountable, let's hold teachers accountable." Maybe you'll have some politicians saying, "Let's hold government accountable." But practically nobody is saying, "We're going to hold students accountable as well." Now --

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

AL SHANKER: -- one of the major differences between the U.S. and other countries is that in other countries, nobody is held accountable but the students -- nobody but the students.

Now, there's a lot of talk about tenure in the United States. I can tell you that if you are a teacher in Germany, you can't get fired. You are what is called in Germany a civil servant, and that doesn't have the same

meaning as it does in the United States; there it means that you really have a job for life. And the same is true in Japan, the same is true in the Netherlands -- I mean, tenure is nothing compared to the job protection that teachers have in other countries. There, no teacher feels accountable, no teacher is evaluated in the ways in which they're evaluated in the United States.

Now, I'm not advocating that teachers not be accountable or that others not be accountable. What I am saying is that as long as students know that no matter how little they learn they will still graduate high school and there will be loads of colleges and universities eager to take them in and that employers are not going to ask 'em for a letter of reference from teachers and that employers are not going to look at their marks or their transcripts, there's one thing that kids always asked me when I was in the classroom if I would give an assignment, if I'd give them homework, if I would give the quiz -- the first question was, "Does it count? Does it count?"

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

AL SHANKER: And so far in the United States we've got to say to kids that what they do doesn't count. They know that nobody's going to look at these things. They know that regardless of how poor their performance that

they will be able to get into a college or university. Now, that's something we can push for politically and it's something we ought to talk about, 'cause when people start talking about, "Hey, the way to make this thing work is private schools"; "The way to make this thing is competition between you and the school over there", when you start losing customers, you're going to start being very good.

Let's tell 'em the way it happens in every other country that works, and that is, in every one of those other countries the students know that if they aren't able to pass an examination at this level, there is no college in the country that will take them. By the way, they're not denied additional education, but they won't go to a college; they'll go to some other form of educational institution.

Now the reason I talked about smaller schools a few minutes ago has something to do with student stakes. So long as we can't say to students, "Look, you've got to work or otherwise you won't get into college"; "You've got to work or you won't get your work certificate" -- if we don't have these external incentives, we have to create internal incentives. And internal incentives essentially are personal relationships. Can we organize a school -- by

the way, we should do it anyway; it's a good thing to do and most of us went into teaching because we want to have relationships like that with youngsters, but we can't have them in the kind of size situation that we now have.

Well, this is going to be another important year where we determine what happens over the next four or eight -- if George Bush gets back and we have a good chance at Dan Quayle four years from now.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

AL SHANKER: By the way, people had the same thoughts about "that's impossible" about George Bush if you'll recall. There were all sorts of people praying that George Bush be the Republican nominee because he was a wimp and he couldn't make it and nobody liked him and it was all that negative stuff -- it's the same stuff that's around now. And we've kept talking about what would happen to the Supreme Court -- well, that's done. It's not only the Supreme Court; Federal Court appointments during the last 11 years have basically reversed the kinds of decisions that will be made in courts on all kinds of issues that we are interested in. The whole business of private/public schools will be decided on the basis of whether we have a White House that presses one way or presses another way.

So I return to the earlier theme, and that is,

there are going to be all sorts of things out there like this House bank. I think it was stupid. I think it shows a very out of touch relationship. I can say all kinds of negative things about it, but in comparison to savings and loan thing, which is hundreds of billions of dollars --

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

AL SHANKER: -- in comparison to BCCI, which is billions of dollars -- I mean, no taxpayer lost one penny on this. I mean actually they were borrowing from each other. They were -- it was terrible, it was lousy; I'm glad it's closed up. But the notion that millions of Americans are going to forget about the hundreds of billions -- thousands of dollars for each individual that's going in there to pay savings and loans and here not one single penny was spent; and yet political decisions, people who are very good on our issues, are going to be targeted and they're going to be defeated because of this idiotic thing.

Now we've got to go out there and talk some sense. We shouldn't say we like it. I don't like it. I was as appalled and offended as anyone else.

But when all is said and done, we've got to weigh the harm that this will do if we follow instincts on it.

Well, good to be back. Congratulations on year

20. Very important year. Let's capture the White House.
Let's turn the economy around. Let's get good contracts
again. Let's get all these things right.

Thank you very much.

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

(END OF PROCEEDINGS AS RECORDED)