

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
QUEST 1993 EDUCATIONAL ISSUES CONFERENCE

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ADDRESS BY
AFT PRESIDENT ALBERT SHANKER
July 8, 1993

MS. FELDMAN: I would like all the delegates to take their seats, please.

Hi, my name is Sandra Feldman, president of United Federation of Teachers and AFT vice president. We have to keep to the schedule here because we're on C-SPAN, and we have to live up to what the technology requires of us.

First, I want to pay tribute to all of you participants here. It is a real tribute to your professionalism. The people watching on C-SPAN ought to know that all of these educators are here voluntarily in the dreadful heat of Washington, D.C.

(Applause.)

In fact, I think we're having the biggest heat wave in 100 years, and here you are, ready to work to better your skills and knowledge in order to do your job better, so it's a real tribute.

The theme of this year's conference, achieving high standards, is, of course, nothing new to those of us who have been in the teacher union movement for a long time. Of course, the idea of national standards is a new idea for the United States, and it's a very interesting and provocative topic, that Al [Shanker] is going to be talking about. But the issue of standards is hardly new to American educators. In fact, I was just asking Al if he remembered when the first QUEST conference was, because I wasn't born yet, but I think about 1970 or something, some ancient date like that.

(Laughter.)

And the name of the QuEST conference, after all, is Quality Educational Standards in Teaching, and over the past two decades, while standards have always been a tremendous concern of ours, we have watched with growing unhappiness as we've had a steady downward slide in education, in educational standards, as it became more important for kids to be happy in school than to hail to tough demands. And one could make a long speech about the societal changes that accompanied that downward slide in standards in school, but we don't have time for that. But we did have a situation which led to a serious relaxation of consequences for academic value for kids.

Of course the teachers continued to get blamed. And while that was happening, we were not permitted -- in fact, we were expected not to hold kids accountable for performance. We've been in fights -- at least as organized teachers, we've been in fights against things like social promotion, grade inflation. We even have a clause in our contract which enables us to grieve if they inflate the grades that teachers give, because principals would do that to try to make the schools look better.

We've been dealing with inflexible curriculum requirements that were so broad that we weren't able to deal with anything in-depth. And we've had an unwillingness on the part of school administrations to enforce discipline, to give us an environment in which we could make sure that the behaviors that we required of kids in order to learn would happen. And we've had a situation where teachers, I think, have been exhausting themselves, working their hearts out in so many places, isolated in the classroom, although we've had some changes with school-based management and shared decisionmaking.

We've made some inroads on that. But basically, we've been forced to use our own personal authority, because the system didn't provide us with the authority that we should have in order to get students really working. I think that most of us feel that we could be undermined at any time if our demands are too high and too tough. And that goes not only to academic standards but to some of my hobby horses: the standards of dress in schools, like you can't wear hats in my classroom but it's okay out in the hallway; the fact that we've seen a deterioration in a lot of places, especially in the inner-city schools, of the standards of just plain old cleanliness in schools; that we've got such watered-down textbooks that we actually had the phrase "dumbing down" invented in the '80s. I think it's all a symptom of what we've been experiencing.

So we're very happy to hear serious talk about high standards, if it's for real, and we're going to work at making it real, because educators understand very well the need for quality standards, for meaningful assessment, for academic rigor and for the systemic support that is absolutely required in order for those standards to be adhered to. We cannot do this by ourselves. We need partners. We need a lot more parental support, administrative support and governmental commitment to education as a priority, something that we haven't had but which now, with the Clinton administration, is definitely in the air. Not landed quite yet, but it's in the air.

So we are looking forward to a very successful conference and thorough discussion of a lot of very important issues. And to open the conference, it gives me very great pleasure and is an honor to be able to introduce someone who really needs no introduction to this audience, but I just want to tell one small recollection. I'm sure there are a lot of people here who were present, as I was, when this happened.

It was at a convention in the early '80s. We had a president in the White House whom we had fought hard to defeat, and he had not only won but he was enjoying very great popularity. At the same time, among other awful things he was doing, he was cutting education funding, or trying to, and we were fighting that. It was Ronald Reagan, in case anybody doesn't remember. And he had appointed a prestigious commission which came out with a report called "A Nation at Risk." And we got the report, we read it. Remember this came from a commission appointed by a president that some people like, but we didn't like him very much organizationally.

The report at a first reading made us angry. It criticized our schools, talked about mediocrity, it urged higher standards and great accountability. And coming, as I said, from a commission appointed by a president that we were constantly criticizing and fighting, we normally would have had a knee-jerk reaction -- we would have been very negative, defensive, and criticize him for criticizing us. But that didn't happen.

Al got up to speak at the convention. I remember the report came out right about the same day Al was supposed to speak or the day before Al was supposed to speak at our convention, and he embraced the report. He urged us to look at it very hard and to look at it honestly, at its substance, and he interpreted it for us. And he had us on our feet. We were cheering a whole new way of thinking about how we were going to approach the fight for school improvement, fight for change and for the excellence that we always advocated and always aspired to and that we always adhere to.

And that was really, I think, really what started the education reform movement in this country. When The New York Times on its front page reported that the leader of America's teachers, instead of defending the status quo against an intelligent report that made a lot of legitimate suggestions about how the schools ought to be changed, joined, in fact took the lead, in the battle for education reform, the reform movement began in earnest at that time. And it's been a great fight ever since.

We've had a lot of small victories, we've had setbacks, and we have tremendous potential still out there, riding that momentum. So it's a very great honor and privilege for me to bring Al Shanker to the podium to talk about achieving high standards in education.

(Applause.)

MR. SHANKER: Thank you very much. We have a number of guests with us. We won't introduce all of them this evening, but I do want to introduce two guests who will appear with us tonight. Sharon Robinson is assistant secretary of education and head of the office of educational research and improvement. Sharon is a good friend. We worked closely when she was assisting Mary Futrell in helping to build the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. And since OERI occupies space in our building, Sharon has actually moved from the NEA building to the AFT building.

(Applause.)

We knew Sharon would be here, but I was surprised and am very happy that Mary Futrell, former president of the NEA and now president of Educational International, with which we are affiliated, is here with us tonight, so greet her.

(Applause.)

There are a number of international guests here who will be introduced at another session.

Well, as Sandy pointed out, this is the 10th anniversary of A Nation at Risk, and in some ways nothing has changed, and in some ways, lots of things are moving and changing. When I saw the program title -- Achieving High Standards -- which I guess I approved at some point, and when I saw it more recently, I tried to put myself in the shoes or desk or seat of thousands of our members across the country who were reading that announcement. And the thought entered my mind that perhaps people who were looking at that title and thinking of the situation that they were facing in their schools or their districts were sort of

saying, "Are these people out of their minds? What's the matter with them? Here they are, going to go to Washington. They're going to spend four days talking about how to raise the achievement levels of students in our schools, but we don't have time to think about things like that. We come from schools that were built for 500 students and are holding 1000 to 1500 or 2000. We're working through the summer trying to figure out in many of our places how to avoid layoffs and cuts in very essential programs. Thousands, hundreds of thousands, have faced salary freezes for a long time. Teachers have taken very substantial salary cuts. Others are involved in very long-term contract fights."

When Sandy was up here introducing me, I was thinking particularly about her and about the members of her local [United Federation of Teachers, New York City] who are here and how difficult it is to concentrate -- (Applause) -- how difficult and almost impossible it is to concentrate on broader issues of improving education when you're involved in a nasty contract fight. People who were looking at that title also were in schools where the student turnover is so great that many teachers find it hard to get to know the names of their students. And when we test kids at the end of the year or every two years, the kids that we are testing have only been there for a short period of time; they're not kids we have taught for very long.

And I wondered about how our members in suburbs would react to that title. Just a few weeks ago, there was a lead piece in The Washington Post which talked about teachers in wealthy suburbs, where you would think everything was all right. This was a very long piece showing how students in these wealthy

suburbs felt that every time a teacher suggested that they might keep quiet or pay attention or bring their homework in on time, the students felt it obligatory to defend their own dignity by using every four-letter word that they could think of and hurl those at the teacher.

And I thought about how teachers who send notes home to parents and ask them to come to school to a conference and never got an answer would react. And I wondered about how teachers who watch superintendents come and go, school boards come and go, and principals come and go would react. Or those of us who are subjected to every new fad and get all the blame when those fads fail.

Probably some of them thought about how they were hired to teach, thought they would teach reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, but instead they have to do drug and alcohol education, sex education, AIDS education, coping with divorce education, student self-esteem exercises, gang member detection, violence prevention and conflict resolution sessions and child abuse detection and reporting and a whole bunch of other things. Everything but real teaching.

And I thought, they're reading that we are about to have this conference dealing with raising educational standards, and they are sitting there or standing and thinking that what they're really asked to do is be social workers, moms, dads, therapists, cops, nutritionists, public health workers, medical technicians and perhaps, from the point of view of the students, jailers.

(Applause.)

In many schools, the last thing that anybody wanted us to think about is improving the achievement levels of students. Well, it is important that we have this conference, and I thank all of you for coming. It's a great turnout, given the problems that we face and given the fact that these issues that we face on the national scene do seem, and are indeed, strange and irrelevant to so many people who are working in the schools. But we have to do it first because we still face these tremendous threat to public education. threats.

We in public education are paying a very heavy price for the lack of focus that schools have. In most other countries in the world, it's very clear what school is for. School is there for the purpose of teaching youngsters their language, other languages, mathematics, history, geography, science...the disciplines, and eventually interdisciplinary studies. That's clear. And things that interfere are not permitted to intrude the way they are in the United States.

We can see the results of our failure to have that focus, of our turning the schools into all-purpose institutions. Now, you know it's hard enough to do a good job when you've only got one job to do. There are lots of businesses out there trying to do just one thing, like make cars so they can make money or make something else so they can make money. They are very focused. There's one thing they're making and they want to sell it and make money. Lots of them are not able to figure it out or able to do it well, even when they have only got one thing to do. But when an institution is turned into something that is so multipurpose there is no way that it can do a good job -- it cannot fulfill any of its purposes?

Now, on your seats when you came in -- and we're not going to go through this at length, but I hope you'll hold on to it and take a close look at it -- there are some reproductions here of pages that deal with problems that we face in American education [charts attached]. I think that we always need to start with: what are our problems? We need to face them honestly and squarely, because there is no way that we're seriously going to address these problems unless we first know what they are.

On page 1, you will see a chart about reading proficiency. You will have ample time to look through that, but if you look at the bottom, very bottom section, which says "advanced level: 350," that's what would be considered a level of reading that certainly everybody going on to college in other countries and lots of other students would have.

In the United States, we had only 6.6 percent of our students at that level. These are students who are still in school. The 20 or 25 percent of kids drop out weren't tested. 6.6 percent were at the advanced level in 1971, down to 4.8 percent in 1988. So we have a very, very small percentage of youngsters who are able to read well.

You see that even if you move down to the next level, only 41.8 percent of our students are there. Now, just so that these numbers are not meaningless abstractions, we've created the next three pages to give you examples of what those levels are, the kind of thing that you had to do in order to reach that level.

So when you look at page 4, you will see an example of that highest level, 350, and that's the kind of work that only 4.8 percent of those who are still in school could do.

Now, move to pages 5 and 6. These are work samples from 11th graders. They were asked to write a paragraph on some topic, and they were given a description of the topic. In the example on page 5, they were asked to write to a senator or representative arguing either that the space program should be continued or that the space program should be cut off.

Now, the top sample that you see -- which really offers practically no reasoning whatsoever -- 82 percent of the 11th graders provided answers like that one. And if you go to the one that's slightly better but still not very sophisticated -- the one at the bottom of the page -- 28 percent were able to do that. You have a similar exercise on the next page. Students are given some material on how life on the frontier was different from today and were asked to write a paragraph on those differences -- to explain how modern-day food differs from food during frontier days. And again you'll see that 63 percent wrote a paragraph which, by international standards, is probably third or fourth grade level. It's very childish stuff. And only 18 percent were able to write something like that bottom one, which is not great either.

Now, if you go to the next page, you'll see the results in mathematics. Once again, if you look at that very bottom right number, you see that only 5 percent of 12th grade students could achieve at level 350 which in any other country would be

considered a minimal level for college entry. If you go up one section above that, to level 300, you see that only 45 percent achieve at that level. So basically you have half the high school youngsters in the country, kids who probably are about to graduate high school, who haven't reached what we would consider -- and what every other country certainly considers -- high school graduation standards.

The next page is a graph which shows that kids in private schools don't do much better than kids in public schools -- even though private schools are very selective and they don't have vocational tracks or general track courses. Most of the private and parochial high schools have entrance examinations so if you don't start at a certain base you don't get in; if you don't do your homework, you get kicked out. In spite of all of that, the achievement differences are very, very small.

Now, on the next page, we reproduced a page from a third grade mathematics textbook that was used throughout the Soviet Union. Look at the reading level and look at the kinds of questions that are asked and the thinking that's involved and the level of computation that's involved. I was having dinner the other night in New York, and the people next to me wanted to know if I'd eaten there before, were asking advice on the menu. And it turned out that the woman came from Moscow just a few weeks ago and the man came from another area of the country. They started talking about they loved it here, but the one thing is education. They said that even though they had their kid in a very good private school, their eighth grade youngster was learning what she had learned in the third grade back home.

If you look at the next page, that's a page from a Japanese seventh grade math textbook. Now, please don't think this is for elite Japanese kids. There is a ministry of education in Japan. It publishes the texts books for everyone. There is no tracking in the seventh grade anywhere in Japan; there is no tracking until the 10th grade, so every single youngster in Japan uses this textbook and does this work unless they're in some very special program for severely mentally retarded kids. That's a very, very small percentage of them.

So this is not only for college-bound kids. This is not only for the top track. This is for every single kid in Japan. Look at it, seventh grade.

On the next page, you see two different mathematics examinations. Everyone must pass a math exam to get into college in Japan. The exam we see, examination A, that's if you want to go into mathematics or science or technology. But if you want to go into a field like economics or social studies, you take an easier exam. Just take a look at that easier exam, I guess we could ask not only how many American students could pass it but how many American teachers could pass it, or college professors. It's tough.

Now, the next few pages have college entrance exams in France, the baccalaureate. Look at that. Just think of those writing samples you saw earlier and take a look at pages 12 and 13. Students have four hours to write an answer to the question on the evolution of domestic policy in the Soviet Union from '53 to today. It gives you these facts, and then you write an essay for four hours on what happened in the Soviet Union during that period of time.

On the next page are questions about developments in presidential power in domestic and foreign policy in the United States. Those are from France. The next page is a British examination for students who have specialized in U.S. history. I wonder how many U.S. students could answer these questions on U.S. history.

And finally the last page is a question from the Abitur in Germany, which all kids must take and pass to get into college.

When we deal with questions about how well we're doing and how poorly we're doing, the most important things we can look at are not these international examinations. They are all right, but there are always difficulties in using them because the curriculum among countries isn't exactly the same and you can never be sure whether some countries aren't selecting students that do especially well to take the test. But we can look at examination questions in other nations, we can look at student work or we can look at textbooks in different countries. When you look at these things -- and this is just a small sample -- you reach a conclusion which is very, very clear, and that is that students are capable of doing much more complicated, much higher levels of work than we provide for them in the United States. Other countries are providing challenges which we do not provide.

Now, these college examinations that you see samples of back here, these are passed by, depending on the country, 50 to 60 percent of the youngsters within these countries. Even if we're busy with all of these problems that have been thrown on us, these are things we can't ignore. Over time, these differences

in achievement will more and more translate into advantages and disadvantages. And I'm not just talking about the economic sphere but about the political sphere as well. Because if you don't have people who can read or write or think, you're not going to have people who are able to make intelligent decisions in elections or participate as citizens. That, perhaps, is more important than the economic issue.

(Applause.)

We intend, by the way, to disseminate more of these materials through our publications because I think it's very important. And I hope you'll share them with other people in your community. It's not just for teachers. Show what students can do. Show what happens when you have a system where there are standards and where students and teachers and parents and everyone knows what is required of youngsters.

Now, the United States is presented with two choices. One, which is very popular with some people, is to dismantle public education and move toward vouchers or some sort of competitive market system. A week and a half ago, I was at a seminar out in Colorado with one of the people who is going to be a speaker here, former president of Yale, Benno Schmidt, who is now head of the Edison Project. And his big argument as to why we really had to move away from public education -- he said, "Look, public schools are just loaded with bureaucracies, governments are bureaucracies, and it's a monopoly. You know how government works. Government never gets anything done right, and you know monopolies. They don't have to change because they're not worried somebody else will get your business. They have you trapped, so that's it."

That sounded very good to the people there. But I think it's very important that we see that there is no other country that has one of these market or voucher systems of education. It doesn't really exist anywhere. There is not any system where the quality of public education depends on private and public schools actively competing with each other the same way two automobile companies compete with each other.

Maybe it would work, but I don't think it would. The fact is that it would be kind of ridiculous, and I would say immoral, to roll the dice and gamble the educational futures of 40 million American youngsters on a system that nobody has tried anywhere.

(Applause.)

Beyond that, let's take a look at what youngsters are able to do in Germany, in Japan, in France, in Russia, in Sweden and in countries throughout the world. Those are all government systems. Those are all monopolies. As a matter of fact, if anything, they have bigger monopolies than ours because instead of having 15,500 little boards of education, a number of these nations have one big, huge national education monopoly. The national government runs the school system.

So if there's any conclusion that can be drawn by these differences, it's not that we ought to move to a system that's more fragmented than the one we have right now. Perhaps we need, in some respects, more coordination and more centralization, because that's what these other countries have, and it works in those countries.

Now, what is it that these other countries have? I think it's important that we exercise the same type of intelligence in trying to deal with educational problems that we would exercise in any other field. Here we are, we're running schools in this country, we're not getting very good results. And other countries are running schools and they are getting results that are substantially better than ours, and they are getting them for the most part with all of their students. There are a few exceptions.

The first thing we want to do is to take a look at what they're doing that works and see if we can do it here. That doesn't mean doing it exactly, because the Germans don't have the French system and the French don't have the British system and the British don't have the Japanese system, and every one of these systems is a different system, but there are some things that they have in common.

So this evening I want to spend my time on two issues. One is a political fight dealing with this set of issues here in Washington, a fight that is not seeing that much publicity. Chances are that most school board members and most teachers don't know about it. With the exception of people here in Washington who are engaged in this political struggle, very few people know about it. But it's an important issue for us all to know about because our future to a large extent will be determined by just how this works out.

The second issue that I want to talk about is a remarkable development in educational knowledge which is, I believe, a major breakthrough in terms of the professionalization of teachers.

Now, the first one deals with this framework. The American people are trying very hard to stick with public education. So far wherever they have had a chance to vote on funding public versus market or private schools, whether it's been in Colorado or Oregon or, not too many years ago, right here in Washington, D.C., they chose public. Or when they had a chance to make a statement like that in the election, they chose Clinton, who opposed vouchers, over Bush, who supported them. There is no evidence that there is a huge rush on the part of the American people to abandon public education.

I have a feeling that they like the idea of public schools, that there's a certain nostalgia, that public schools have done a good job for this country for over 200 years. But I also have a feeling that they don't like the way the schools are now and that their loyalty to public education is waning very, very quickly. And if you look at poll results, the very lopsided results that used to be there for public education have changed somewhat, and there is an increasing number of people who are willing to abandon public education and move to a private system.

Now, President Clinton was elected on an education platform that called for the establishment of standards, of world-class assessments, of a system that would deregulate, decentralize so people within schools would have greater empowerment to try different ways of reaching those standards. He appointed Richard Riley as Secretary of Education, an outstanding choice, a

former governor who made reforms just like this in his state some years ago. Together they came up with an excellent piece of legislation, Goals 2000.

It has a number of parts to it. One would set up a national board which would issue sort of a Good Housekeeping seal of approval to standards for what students should know and be able to do. This would not be a board that would create standards and it wouldn't be a board that would create curriculum and it wouldn't be a board that would create examinations. It would be something like the National Bureau of Weights and Measures. They don't make scales or rulers, but they do set standards so that a pound is a pound on all scales, and a foot is a foot. And that would be the idea here, that others would do the production of standards and this board would say, "We've looked at what is done in other countries and this set of standards meets that standard."

Simultaneously, there would be encouragement to states to develop statewide improvement plans, and the improvement plans would have to include procedures that would involve all the schools in the state; that is, it was not to be a top-down state plan where a state commission or state board of education would tell you how to do it. It would be, this is how we're going to consult and involve people at the school level to do something.

Well, all that was fine, but then came an issue. If you put in high standards, if you say that youngsters at different grades have to do the kinds of things that they do in other countries and if you're going to put in assessments, those assessments

might eventually be used to say that some kids get promoted and others may be held back, some might graduate and others may not, some might enter college and others may not, some may use that diploma to help them get a job and others may find it more difficult to get a job because they haven't reached the standards.

So now there are consequences. And then a number of members of Congress raise a question, and it's a good question. The question they raise is, is it fair? Isn't it true that some kids go to schools where all the teachers are certified and other kids go to school where there hasn't been a certified math or science teacher in years or where the teacher turnover is tremendous or where they have huge numbers of uncertified teachers or where they don't have textbooks? Some schools have computers for the kids; others don't. Some offer good courses and encourage youngsters to take them, and others don't. Some schools have all the advantages, and others are the kinds of schools that we read about in Jonathan Kozol's book. They raised a very good question.

But then what they did was a bunch of amendments, changes in the bill which would essentially paralyze it. Here the American people are being offered a system of standards and assessments and everybody's hope goes up that things are about to change, but with one hand Congress gave and with the other hand they took away, because they then put an amendment in that said none of the tests that we certify can be used for anything that makes any difference to any kids for at least five years.

Now, I don't know about you but when I was teaching, whenever I gave the kids an assignment or a project to do or gave them a quiz or an exam, before I could say the next word, half of the kids would say, "does it count?"

(Laughter.)

I see you've had the same experience. So Congress is now going to establish a bunch of standards and assessments, and right in the bill it says that it won't count for kids for at least five years. They don't say it will count after five years. They're going to think about it five years from now.

Secondly, they have said this national council that is supposed to certify standards and assessments must also figure out something called opportunity to learn standards. That's like saying we're going to have judges for the Olympics and we'll watch somebody jump or swim or run, and at the moment the race is ended you do not just say who came in first, second or third; you have to ask yourself whether each of those kids had the same opportunity to have their own swimming pools in their own backyard and take that into account, or did they have the same tracks that they could practice on or the same coaches. Well, clearly you'd never have any Olympic results if you did that sort of thing. That council will become semiparalyzed because they have to deal with too many issues. It's hard enough to deal with, what are world-class standards, what should our curriculum frameworks be, how much is good enough, what kind of assessment should we have. And now you've got to add this other item on, which essentially is a way of throwing something into the machinery so the whole thing breaks down.

Then there's a third aspect. It says the tests have to be valid. Well, everyone knows what that means. They have to be reliable. Every psychometrician knows what that means. And they have to be fair. Well, what does fair mean? Nobody knows.

(Laughter.)

Well, some people know. I think I know because I asked some of the people who put the word in. It's basically going to be a field day for lawyers. Fair is going to mean, does the test have disparate results? Do some groups of people, some minorities, women, men, et cetera, do better or worse? And if they do, the test gets thrown out.

Or the other way of dealing with it is to have the test race-normed, which is essentially to say that you allow different scores for different ethnic groups so that every group gets the same percentage of pass scores. It reminds me of something that happened some years ago. It was proposed by Education Commissioner Sidney Marland. He proposed to have different pass scores for different ethnic groups. And I remember a group of African-American parents in Brooklyn who got so angry about this that they came down to Washington and said our kids aren't learning to read, write and count and now instead of teaching them that, you want to change the scores to convince us that they're doing just as well as other youngsters. And Marland abandoned that idea within a week because the whole thing was exposed. It was not an effort to help youngsters achieve more. It was an effort to cover up needs that were there.

There's another issue out there. They say that if you have standards, some youngsters are going to be helped more than other youngsters, and that's not fair. Youngsters who have the computer will move ahead faster. Now, they're not saying that all youngsters won't do better; they will all move ahead somewhat, but some will move ahead faster than others and greater inequality will be created.

Well, think about that. Suppose that tomorrow somebody developed a vaccine to cure AIDS but it can only cure half the people who had it. How many people would argue that it's unfair to give that vaccine to the half that it would cure because it would be unfair to the other half and the right thing to do would be to withhold it until we found one that would cure it for everybody at the same time? Is there any reasonable person that would take that position? Well, Congress may take that position in education: that unless we can help all the youngsters simultaneously, we can't put reform into place.

I remember about 25 years ago, right in this city, it may very well have been in this hotel, either this one or the Sheraton, there was a conference of the Civil Rights Commission, and Kenneth Clark spoke. And Kenneth Clark said -- and he was very angry in his tone and manner of speaking -- he said, "you know, lots of Irish kids came through the system and they gave them arithmetic and reading and writing and geography and algebra and geometry. They were tough with them. Some passed, some didn't. They went on. Then came the Jewish kids and Polish kids and the same thing happened." And he went through a whole bunch of ethnic groups. And he said they were given solid academic

stuff and they were pushed hard and they were either passed or flunked, and a lot of them made it because of that.

And next he said, then at the end of the war a lot of African-American kids moved from South to North and went into these school systems. As soon as they got there, the system stopped saying you've got to learn arithmetic, reading, writing, algebra... The system became sort of a social work institution, and people looked out at the kids and said, gee, how can we expect them to learn anything? We've got to help them to adjust and feel happy. We've got to understand them, feel sorry because of their circumstances.

He was very angry about this. And he essentially said, you give our kids the same challenges and over time they will meet those challenges and they will do just as well as anybody else. But if you don't give them the challenges, they will never make it.

(Applause.)

I believe that he was right.

(Applause.)

In some circles, they call that tough love. Well, what schools choose to do with kids has a lot of comparison between with what parents do. There are parents who think that they're doing everything right for their kids if they do everything the way the kids want them to do it. And we know that's wrong. We know that parents who are really doing something for their kids are parents who sometimes have to be tough. And it's very hard. But you know that you're doing a lot more for them when you are tough, and that's what Ken Clark was saying. That's what minimum competency tests showed. We heard the same argument: Put those

tests in and a lot of kids will flunk and drop out. Well, they haven't dropped out. There are fewer dropouts and there are more youngsters meeting those standards. Those standards are too low, but they are meeting them.

These members of Congress like to pretend that if you give all kids good marks and pass them on, promote them and then graduate them and let them into college and let them out of college without meeting any standards anywhere, that somehow we have created equality. But they don't realize that the world out there doesn't work that way, because one of these days these kids are going to want to be a pilot or doctor or an electrician, and if they don't know their stuff, they're not going to make it.

At some point you are just hit by reality, that either you've got it or you don't have it. If the schools don't have standards, and if they can't tell the truth to the youngsters and to their parents, the world eventually will tell them the truth: you don't qualify for this because you can't do the work.

(Applause.)

Now, the other thing that we have in this discussion around this legislation, and also in the discussion around reauthorization of Chapter 1, has to do with student accountability. Every other country in the world holds students accountable. That is, if a student works hard and gets the work done, the student gets promoted, gets moved into a better track, gets graduated, gets into college, or gets a good job. If a student doesn't do it, they don't get promoted or they get put into a lower track or they don't get to college; they get to another school. But there are very clear rewards and

punishments, very clear consequences, very clear visibility that if you work hard and get to know your stuff, you make it, and if you don't, it's not the same.

In none of these other countries is there any system of accountability for adults. Now, I am not arguing against adult accountability. I favor it. But I am saying that we will totally oppose any system that says that kids can do nothing and move along and not be held accountable but the teachers and other adults will be held accountable.

(Applause.)

Congress is saying something like America is going to hold doctors accountable for their patients' failure to stop smoking even if the doctors have done everything that they could to make sure that people stopped smoking.

Well, these are the issues that we're facing. Look, I think all kids ought to have computers and terrific schools and fully certified teachers. I'm not saying that we shouldn't fight for these and other things and that a kid shouldn't have them. That isn't the issue. The issue is do you hold up a whole reform system which will give youngster encouragement and say to youngsters, here is what you've got to learn, here are the standards, and which will focus the efforts of teachers and textbooks and all of society in that direction -- or do you hold that hostage until everything in the world is set right? I'm not making an argument against doing all these other things that need to be done. It is a question of whether you hold everything up until that happens.

What is missing from the Congressional argument is this: They fail to take into account that when you challenge

youngsters, it's not just about the computers they have or the swimming pools in their backyard. Youngsters are very clever and if you motivate them and they see that there's something at stake, they will work very hard to overcome tremendous obstacles. I'm sure lots of people in this room came from backgrounds, in terms of language, in terms of economics, in terms of all sorts of things, where no one would have predicted when you were an early age that you would be here, that you would be where you are now. But when you have a challenging, honest system in place, people surprise you. They make efforts that they wouldn't otherwise make.

Take a look at who wins in the Olympics. It's not always the kid who had a swimming pool in the backyard. It's sometimes a kid who walked a couple of miles to a swimming pool and in spite of terrible odds, made it. And if we don't create a system which inspires youngsters to do that, we are holding them back and failing to give them an opportunity to learn. The failure to give them standards and assessments and clear indications of the difference between success and failure and rewards for hard work -- the failure to do that is to deny them the opportunity to learn. That's precisely what's happening.

(Applause.)

Now, what is our stake in this whole issue as teachers? It may be that we can still shape this up, by the way. The Senate bill is better than the House bill and there will probably be some floor fights on it. This is not over yet and we ask for your help. We're in the middle of the fight, which so far has been very, very disappointing because we're coming close to being

able to put something in place, close to major progress and all of a sudden, there's an effort to destroy the whole thing with all these amendments.

The stake that we have is very clear. If school is not a place where youngsters are supposed to learn and be assessed and be held accountable for effort and achievement, then school is a place where knowledge and skills and application are not very important. Because without these things, we're then sending a message to youngsters that that doesn't count and we're sending a message to parents that that doesn't count. And then the school becomes this place where nothing matters, a place where you just take care of the kids. It's a custodial institution. You don't even have to worry about the impact of whether teachers know anything or not.

I think of Sandy Feldman and the UFT's contract fight. In fact finding, New York City took the position that whether a teacher is licensed or not -- qualified -- or whether they know their stuff or not doesn't make any difference. Both sets of people are qually good so you can have 10,000 or 15,000 uncertified teachers. Why did they take that position? Because it's O.K. by them if everybody is going to pass, every student is going to get promoted, everybody is going to get graduated and everybody whose father can write the check will go to college if they're still alive at 18. That's what happens where there are no consequences.

Officials can say look, it doesn't make any difference if we keep this very violent, destructive kid in class because he's not ruining it for anybody else. Everybody is going to pass anyway. I am saying that if there was such a thing as failing, if there

were standards, parents and other youngsters would say we don't want that youngster ruining our chance to succeed. Schools could be places where all kids have the opportunity to learn because a handful couldn't ruin it for others.

(Applause.)

So what this is about, really, is whether we can do what we came into teaching to do, whether the school is going to be this mushy all-purpose institution that everybody criticizes because it's not doing anything well or whether it gets put together in terms of what its real purpose is: teaching and learning and that's the stake that we have. We must define a clear mission for the schools, as it is in most other countries in the world.

You know, there's a Russian expression which says that it's very easy to take an aquarium and turn it into fish soup, but it's very difficult to turn fish soup into an aquarium.

(Laughter.)

What we're trying to do is turn around what they have done to us: they have turned our schools into fish soup and we're trying this very difficult job of turning it into an aquarium. And we're going to continue to try.

(Applause.)

I want to spend a few minutes on the issue of teacher professionalism. Part of the focus of this conference always in the past has been teacher professionalism. Now, you know, teachers have always said we are professionals, we should be treated like professionals, we should be paid like professionals. But in actual practice, that has not been so. We haven't been treated that way and indeed in the real definition, real sense of that word, this has not been a profession because a profession is

basically made up of people who are experts and by virtue of the expertise that they have, they have a very high degree of decisionmaking power.

Now, because school boards tend to hire people at very low salaries, they don't stay very long and we don't necessarily attract top people to go into the field. All that works against professionalism. As John Cole, one of our vice presidents, once said, "If I hired somebody for \$15,000 a year, you know what I would do? I would watch them very carefully." But watching somebody very carefully is not a mark of professionalism. Nobody stands over the surgeon to see whether he's cutting a little to the left or a little to the right. He is somebody that knows what he's doing. People generally do not assume that teachers know what they're doing.

We are in schools where we've got to be moms and dads and babysitters and all these other things. Many of us and many of our colleagues across the country have been brainwashed. If you ask most teachers, very good teachers, if you ask them to list the important attributes of teachers, what the absolute, the first thing that they would list is that a great teacher, an outstanding teacher, has to care for or love children.

Well, that's wrong. I'm not saying teachers shouldn't care for or love children, but the first thing a teacher has to be is a person who is very knowledgeable about how to get children to learn.

(Applause.)

There is lots of loving and caring in schools, but there isn't very much concentration on learning and on the mind. That's what's missing. Think about it. You would like to go to a doctor who would personally like you and care for you.

(Laughter.)

But if you're really in serious trouble and there's some guy who has a horrible personality and he hates you but he's the greatest surgeon in the world, you're going to pick that person, if you have to make the choice. Now, it's nice if you don't have to make it. The same is true of a lawyer and an engineer or accountant or anybody else. So we've got to make that notion central. Teachers' knowing both their subject and understanding how children learn and therefore how to get children to learn is the central issue. It's also one of the most exciting, most important developments we'll be talking about at this conference.

Now, there are one or two other things happening which you should know about, because we need your support. We have an accreditation group in teacher education [National Council of the Accreditation of Teacher Education -- NCATE]. In medicine there's a group that says this is an accredited medical school and that one isn't. That's true in almost every other field. There is a group like that in education. We're members of it, NEA is a member, other groups are members. For years it was very careful, it didn't want to offend teacher training institutions, so just about everyone got accredited.

But in the last couple of years, they have raised standards. They have very good leadership. They are actually not accrediting some institutions. They said that's not a good program. So what happens is these institutions are saying, okay, you're not going to accredit us, we're against accreditation. We're not going to go for that anymore. It's not important anyway, just as New York City says it's not important if you have a licensed teacher or it's not important if you have an accredited college or university.

So we ought to be pressing in our states to make sure that we move toward legal provisions requiring accreditation. Next year will be the first National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certifications. And I hope that we encourage our members to participate and that as we negotiate contracts, we give compensation and recognition to those outstanding teachers who are going to spend the time and the money and the effort to get themselves nationally board certified on the basis of high standards. These are very, very important issues.

(Applause.)

Now, at this conference we're going to be talking about a major breakthrough in knowledge. It's called cognitive science. People have been working on it for a period of time. The occasion here is not that something new just happened last week but that a very good book was written and we will have the author of that book, John Bruer, here. The book is called Schools for Thought. There's a section of it in your book, and the next issue of the American Educator will have a fine article by Mr. Bruer.

Let me just spend a few minutes on the importance of what cognitive science is. It uses certain frameworks and certain analogies, basically, to say that in every area of learning, you start with a novice, somebody who doesn't really know how to do things, and after trying and learning, you eventually end up with an expert. And if you can analyze how an expert thinks and how a novice thinks, that will give you some clue as to how to get from this form of thinking to that form of thinking. That's one of the ways of looking at it.

The second way of looking at it, think of what happens in a lot of Third World countries. Little kids are being trained in how to weave rugs and they walk into a place and might see 25 adults making rugs, and they will see that some are using left hands and right hands, some are standing, some are sitting, some are starting from one end or another. So the first thing they can see is there are lots of different ways of doing it, and then they're able to do parts of it, able to help. And over a period of time, they go from being absolute novices at it to becoming experts themselves.

Now, what's the difference between learning how to weave a rug and learning how to read or write or do some mathematics? Well, the difference is that weaving a rug is all visible, it's all out there. You can see it. But all these things I just talked about go on inside the head. So the idea is, is there a way of taking what goes inside the head, namely thinking, and bringing it out so that it is visible to youngsters and they're able to see it? So if you can take the mystery out of that so that thinking becomes more like being able to see rug weaving.

Well, they have accomplished a good deal of that, and it's very different in reading, writing, mathematics and science. You know, there's a big argument. Some people say the only important thing about teaching is you have to know your subject. Well, now what cognitive science has discovered is no, it's not just knowing your subject. You do have to know it and you have to know it very well. But you have to understand something about how people think and you have to understand how to expose these

inner elements that go on within the mind. And you also have to know something about bugs that are built into the human beings, ways in which they consistently make certain mistakes and how they can be gotten off of those bugs.

Essentially, this becomes the basis of a science of teaching. This becomes what teachers know, this becomes a way of thinking about youngsters, a way of presenting things, a way of doing things which is as different from what an ordinary math or English or history major would do as the way a doctor performs or a lawyer performs in terms of the professional knowledge in his field.

It is very exciting, and some of these programs we are looking at have been tried first by very sharp individuals who developed the program. Well, we know that sometimes some genius can work at something and it works for that person and it doesn't work for anybody else. So then we watch to see were they able to put this program into schools, into districts, where they take ordinary human beings like most of us and get them to have pretty much the same results? And the answer is yes.

You will hear of a reading program where youngsters in a matter of under 25 days can, through a new method, really be made to advance three to four years in reading level and retain it; about ways of teaching mathematics and science, very exciting. We will, of course, devote some time at this conference to it, but we hope to work with the people who have developed these programs and develop some teacher academies, training programs, and get these things out to schools as soon as we can.

Now, I would like to conclude this with something that I found in The Washington Post (Colman McCarthy column, 7-3-93) the other day. Of course, it so sums up the problem that we have. Since most of you are not from Washington, most of you didn't see this. It's a column by Mr. McCarthy and called "Firing a Messenger."

"To keep up with the high cost of getting by, Adele Jones, a high school algebra teacher in Georgetown, Delaware is waitressing this summer. It may turn out to be permanent. In mid-April, Jones, on the Sussex Central High School math faculty for nine years, was told by the local school board that she would be fired at the end of the academic year. On June 22, the axing became final on a 6 to 4 vote. Jones' offense against learning and scholarship? Too many of her algebra students flunked. Twenty-seven percent in 1991-92 and 42 percent the year before.

"The dismissal of Jones has roiled the tranquillity of Georgetown, a small rural community near the coast. In April, when the board first moved in, more than a third of Sussex Central's 750 students, including many who failed the algebra II course, walked out of the school to march through the streets of Georgetown to support her. Forty-three of the school's 48 teachers in a letter that flunked the board for its dimwitted decision called the firing an injustice and travesty. Many of those teachers, along with students, spoke at a public hearing to argue that Jones was a self-giving and dedicated educator who

should be honored, not fired. She arrived at school early and often stayed until 6 p.m. Students from other classes, even graduates now in college, came to her for help in math. She was a regular at the kids' sporting events and had boundless school spirit.

"If removed from the context of just another school board brawl where nastiness, grudges and score-settling often dominate agendas, the case of Adele Jones is worth watching nationally because it touches on many of the core problems in American education: math competency, teaching quality and grade inflation.

"Jones is in a fix because she rebelled against a professionalization of mediocrity. She declined to wink, to pass kids for showing up. She didn't see her job as giving students false impressions about their math ability. In any of the country's 23,000 high schools or 75,000 elementary schools, that can be dangerous. Parents complain when Ds and Fs and even Cs come home. Administrators apply pressure to grade on a curve. Athletic coaches send the message to go easy so the kid can stay on the team.

"Some teachers don't fight it. Jones, aware of the international studies that rank U.S. students at the bottom in math achievement, refused to compromise. She said "no" to the role of easing kids through the system, much less the processing them like slabs of cheese getting a diploma from Velveeta High. The Indian River school board's main statutory reason for bouncing Jones was its allegation of incompetence. A teacher with so many failed students obviously isn't performing. Otherwise the kids would be learning and passing. That argument

was answered, among other places, by a former algebra II student who carried a sign in the April demonstration that read 'I failed Miss Jones' class and it was my fault.'

(Applause.)

"Signs lining the walls of Sussex Central included 'Students Fail Themselves.' 'Just because a student is failing doesn't mean the teacher is.' An unintended benefit of this battle is the not-in-the-books civics lesson being offered to students at Sussex Central. The education bosses -- the school board -- has sent a message to the kids that they are in school to learn how to think. But not to make decisions. Leave it to the tribal elders to hire and fire.

"Anna Meyer, a student who took Jones' course last year, dissents. She wrote to the Wilmington News Journal and asked why those who fail should get a passing grade for doing nothing just to make the school look good. On the incompetence charge she wondered: 'Have members of the school board ever been in Miss Jones' classroom while she was teaching? No. Another civics lesson the students may learn is the value of unions. The one to which Jones belongs, the Delaware affiliate of the National Education Association, is paying for an attorney to take the case to a state superior court. The expectation is that in a judicial setting, the facts presented near-unanimously by Jones' teaching colleagues about her classroom excellence, as well as the positive evaluation by her students, will matter. As the case stands now, things aren't adding up."

Now, think of that story and just think, has any teacher ever been fired for passing all the students, even if they didn't learn anything? Ask yourself whether this would be possible if we had national standards, if we had national assessments, if these assessments clearly show when these students don't know the stuff. You see, the whole game of education becomes public relations for school boards, petty politics at the local level unless you've got a system that stands for something.

(Applause.)

That's what this whole thing is about. We have a rare opportunity. If we don't take it now, we probably won't see another one like it for a long time to come. I know that we can count on your support.

(Standing ovation.)