



Ken Lane
Legislative Report

Improving Our Schools: Drastic Change or Fine Tuning? An Interview with Albert Shanker

Albert Shanker has been president of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, since 1974. His voice is among the most prominent in the school reform movement, and many of the ideas advanced in such reform documents as the Nation at Risk report, the Carnegie report, and the Commons Commission report were anticipated by Mr. Shanker. His weekly New York Times column, "Where We Stand," and his other writings and presentations at conferences, seminars, and before legislative and business organizations have exerted a major influence on discussions concerning the needs of the schools and on proposals for school change. At the November meeting of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, Mr. Shanker addressed the CTC on the current effectiveness of schools as they are constituted and on the need for "second stage" school reforms. Although some may consider Mr. Shanker's proposals controversial, his analysis of our situation and suggestions for urgently needed structural changes in how we organize schools deserve serious consideration. Because of space limitations, Mr. Shanker's remarks have been somewhat condensed.

Lane: How well are the schools working now that we've had several years of reform implementation in many parts of the country?

Shanker: For the most part, proposed accountability measures, teacher licensing changes, etc. all assume the current system of schooling is working for both students and teachers, and they are essentially efforts to slightly improve the things we are already doing. That would be all right if the current system were working well and if 65, 75, or 85 percent of the students were meeting standards we considered reasonable. Then slight improvements would be reasonable. But

if the success rate is 5-20 percent, then slight modifications to the current system would be a serious mistake because such a system would obviously need a radical transformation.

Lane: Are the schools less successful than they used to be?

Shanker: We are all sensitive to attacks against schools and teachers. We are doing much better with more students than we've ever done in our history, but by any reasonable standard it is not what we should be doing. The signs of failure are evident, for example, in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In literacy, we find that almost everyone can read instructions and follow simple articles in newspapers. But when we look at the level of literacy that we are achieving with 17½ year old students still in high school, we find that only about 37 percent can read with understanding a nationally syndicated columnist in a good newspaper. When it comes to almanacs, charts, etc., only 4.9 percent of the kids in school at this age can understand such material. In writing, the students were asked to write a letter to a prospective employer; the readers were not strict about spelling or grammar, but rather looked to see if the student could be persuasive and muster some evidence to persuade an employer that the writer should get a job. Only 20 percent of the 17½ year old students performed adequately on this task. Under 30 percent of the age group could do simple mathematical problems.

Lane: But in time, won't the recent reforms improve that picture?

Shanker: Does anyone in his right mind believe that by slightly modifying credentialing standards, or by getting slightly better teacher training, or by lengthening the school day or school year, or by slightly improving textbooks, or by adopting some type of merit reward for teachers, or all the things that have been proposed in the last five years, that we'd

be able to move from 20 or 30 percent success up to 67 percent or 85 percent? We once had schools that picked their teachers from a large selection of outstanding applicants. There was a core curriculum, there was parent support for homework, there was no automatic promotion. That was in the nineteen thirties and forties, in the Great Depression, when there was a large pool of highly qualified teachers. The results were excellent — for the 20 percent who graduated from high school in 1940. The first year in which the majority of students graduated in the United States was 1953. After World War II, we made a major effort to keep kids in school and gave them a diploma if they stayed, but according to the NAEP figures, it is still the case that only about 20 percent are learning adequately. We are not getting large numbers of students up to what ought to be minimum standards: the ability to write a decent letter, to read an almanac chart, to perform simple mathematics.

Lane: What kinds of changes are needed to bring about the extensive increases in learning that you suggest are needed?

Shanker: First of all, we should not merely try to improve the current system, because that system is not working and slight improvements will still leave us in a state of disaster. In fact, it might be a disservice to slightly improve the current system because we would lull people into thinking that the problems are being solved. What we saw in 1940 with those great teachers, with the core curriculum, with parental support, etc., was that the kids themselves didn't buy into the educational effort, so it didn't work. At least it didn't work for about 80 percent of them, not to the level of education that we need today.

Lane: Does that mean that and better teacher preparation and higher salaries wouldn't help much?

Shanker: An honest analysis shows that

There is no realistic way of solving our problems under the current school structure. The usual proposals are that teachers should be paid well — and they should be. But the teaching profession is going to need 23 percent of all college graduates for the next twelve or thirteen years. If everyone in teaching got a 50 percent salary increase, it would raise the average teacher's salary in the United States to about \$37,000, at a cost of about \$30 billion, and that is very unlikely to happen. Even if it did happen, all the competing fields like engineering, law, and medicine would start paying even higher salaries in an effort to get the top college talent, so teaching would still be less competitive for the best college graduates. Teachers should receive very high salaries because of the importance of their work, but realistically that won't happen. We have to decide either to keep a lot of teachers not very well paid or to reorganize schools more along the lines of hospitals or law firms, where some practitioners make more money than others, but all have the opportunity to make more. Not everyone gets to be the head of a law firm or becomes a chief surgeon, but the practice of law and medicine are benefited because some lawyers or doctors do make more than others.

Lane: *In California though, working conditions — class size especially — keeps a lot of good people from pursuing a teaching career or remaining in one.*

Shanker: I know class size is a major issue in California, but if we look at the NAEP writing test results, we know that only 20 percent of the 17½ year old students were judged to write reasonably well on the fairly simple tasks that were required. The reason is that the kids do not get coaching or conferencing with their teachers on anything like that on a frequent enough basis, yet such conferencing two or three times a week would bring most of our students up to the level of writing skill we'd like to see. But a teacher with 150 or more students a day would have to devote 30 hours a week just to spend five minutes to read and mark each student's paper and five minutes to talk with each student. It's just not possible. The answer cannot be reduced class size, however desirable that is. It is not feasible nationally as a solution to the problem. To cut class size in half, all of this conferencing would still take 15 hours a week, and then the teaching profession would have to take half of all college graduates in the country for the next decade or more. But other fields need these graduates too. On a national scale we just can't get all those college graduates, and we can't compete with the salaries other fields will pay. The more teachers we hire, the

lower our standards will have to become. After all, we can't get enough of the caliber of people we want now, when we're only taking 23 percent of the college graduates. We do need to have a better pupil/teacher ratio and we should teach kids to write — but we just can't do it by hiring massive numbers of teachers. It just isn't possible.

Lane: *Are there other solutions then?*

Shanker: Well, another problem needs to be looked at first. Teachers everywhere say that they need more time, more time to think, to plan, and to talk with their colleagues and to get away from the isolation. Most adults do not want to spend their entire time with kids. But under the present school structure there are few alternatives. Of course, we could have teachers teach fewer periods of the day, but that means getting more teachers, a lot more, and we again face the numbers problem, and the teacher standards problem. Is there a way of organizing schools differently so that teachers can be paid more and have the time to assign a lot of writing, talk to kids about their writing, and talk to each other? Professionals talking to each other and sharing ideas is the most effective accountability program that exists in accounting, in law, in medicine. No inspection program or licensing program can substitute for the day-to-day contact of people who are involved in the same enterprise shaping each other up by talking about their work. We in teaching must get this tremendous "in-service program" that every other profession has, with all the richness and creativity that it generates.

Lane: *You emphasized how few of our students are succeeding in school by any reasonable standards. Are there practical changes that would enable us to succeed with more than 15-20 percent of the students?*

Shanker: I think there are. We need to ask why the results are so poor. It's not because teachers don't care or don't work hard, or because school boards don't care, or teacher training institutions don't care. We need to ask if the structure of the schools is fundamentally wrong. Are there things we're doing in schools that hinder learning or turn kids off? Are we certifying teachers on the basis of their being able to do the wrong sorts of things? In school, kids essentially have to learn by one of two ways, either by listening to the teacher talk, or by reading. If a kid learns best by any other way, by and large it's too bad. We don't give kids much chance to learn from other kids, from computers, or from VCRs that show how Eskimos live or how a Shakespeare play looks on stage. We don't give them audio tapes or outside adults to consult on their specialties. If a

kid can't sit still and keep quiet for six hours a day (which most adults can't do), then we say the kids are disruptive or disturbed. We treat kids, especially in the early grades, as if they were the same age if they are in the same grade, in spite of knowing that a six-year-old and a seven-year-old can be drastically different in competence and confidence. Each year, we start teaching all kids on the same day — the day when the teacher starts talking. We should ask if there aren't ways to organize schools so there is a much greater variety of ways to learn.

Another problem with schools as we have them is that some kids always have the answer when the teacher calls on them; others are humiliated and defeated every time the teacher calls on them, especially in the early grades. Couldn't school be organized so some of the students' trials and errors are private, or are just seen by a few peers? Can we organize school so that the payoff, the final grade, does not come so far down the road, leading kids (like many adults) to procrastinate until it is too late to catch up?

Lane: *When you raise these questions, it highlights how arbitrary our school structures and systems of teaching are.*

Shanker: Sure. Why should semesters be 18 weeks long? Why not have three-week semesters, so if a kid flunks he can make it up fairly quickly? It's done in some vocational schools. We need to start changing the system, or inventing a system that would work for more kids. There may be many different ways of designing such a school, but basically, I'm thinking of a school where some teachers can earn \$100,000 a year, where teachers have time to read student papers often and can coach students and hold conferences with them, where professionals and adults have time to talk to each other and create their own accountability and inservice informally,

(continued pg. 30)



Albert Shanker

(Barone/Bradshaw cont. from pg. 29)

it into the lake. Then I shanked my drive into the trees on the right. The ball landed up against a tree, and I couldn't get relief so I took a swipe at it and wiffed. I punched it out with a seven iron short of the green, then hit a wedge into the sand trap. I blasted out long but hit a good approach and sank a two-footer for nine. After that it was bogie, bogie, double bogie, bogie and a big fat 42."

"Some days are like that, Gerry."

"Right. I've got a starting time for a foursome at three. See you tomorrow."

SENSE OF FORM

Stop Those Verbs of Being

In Poway High School's writing classes, more specifically, Writing Seminar, students write powerfully and creatively. Simply, they stride like giants as writers by first walking like men as editors; they line out and erase those verbs of being. In their place, they pencil-in action verbs. As a result, their writing jumps to life, sparkling with personality, instead of just being.

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SENSE OF IRONY

I had difficulty working with my father. I could never match his high standards. Whatever I did either displeased him or received suggestions on how to do it right. He demanded perfection, or so it seemed to this teenager. The other day I angrily criticized my fourteen year old son for not using his paintbrush properly. His response showed me how I felt about my own father when my son said, "I'm sorry I can't be as perfect as you."

(Lane, continued from pg. 23)

when kids can come into the system where they're ready and can leave for brief periods without falling hopelessly behind their age group. Where younger kids especially can learn and make mistakes "privately," without public humiliation in front of the teacher and the whole class, where kids who can't learn by listening to someone talk or by reading a book can learn in a variety of different ways. Those are some of the attributes of an improved and radically different system.

Most important of all, however, we have a terrible curriculum. To certify teachers on the basis of how well they do with the current curriculum is a mistake. The curriculum is too oriented toward a

learning theory in which the kids memorize facts, in which their heads are seen as empty vessels to be filled. People quickly forget what they learn in this way because there is no personal involvement, no activity that makes the subject their own.

Lane: *Is a classroom and a learning model such as you're sketching here feasible in schools?*

Shanker: I think so. The way kids earn merit badges in the Boy Scouts provides a better model for organizing instruction than most of our current structures: in the Boy Scouts, youngsters go out into the real world, observe things, talk to live people, help one another with their merit badges and other projects, and learn by doing the sort of work that professionals in the various fields do. For example, they learn about birds not only from a book or chart, but by getting up at 5:00 a.m., going out to the woods, looking at live birds in their natural setting, often with several peers, keeping records, drawing conclusions, arranging demonstrations for one another, not just for the Scoutmaster. That kind of learning changes us. It stays with us, not for a week or a month after an examination, but for life. School needs to look more like a Boy Scout troop, with various groups of kids doing different things, rather than all doing the same thing as so often happens now. Kids need to help one another with the things they are good at. The Scoutmaster doesn't lecture all the time; the kids take part in many different activities, including peer tutoring.

In their projects a Scout troop makes extensive use of outside adults and experts. In school we too often view outside adults as threats, as intruders. But in the schools I have in mind, teaching would be organized so that kids would be learning from books, videotapes, audiotapes, computers, older kids, and parents and volunteers from the community. We would credential certain teachers as lead teachers; they would be outstanding as leaders of an adult team, and would organize resources and determine the need for the activities pursued by individual kids. If a student didn't learn by one method, he would not be labeled dumb. Instead, the lead teacher would suggest another method of learning that might work. After all, physicians don't blame the patient if a course of treatment doesn't work; they try something else. In addition to lead teachers, an instructional team would include other teachers who might not be outstanding but would still be pretty good. The salaries would differ for the different levels of skill in teaching, just as the certification standards would differ, and the

activities that the different standards involved would make sense.

Lane: *Are there existing models of this sort of differentiation now?*

Shanker: There certainly are in other professions. In medicine there are specialists and a variety of support personnel. If everyone working in hospitals had to be a doctor, there would be seven million doctors and they'd all earn teacher salaries. But functions and levels of expertise are differentiated in hospitals. And besides, you couldn't get seven million people of top ability to practice medicine as physicians. In teaching, we need such differentiated positions and a variety of ways of structuring the school so that the teacher isn't always lecturing, so adults have time to read student papers and to conference with kids, so kids are involved in their own learning. This sort of thing can only be done if teachers get away from the constant talking and lecturing that ties them down now. And, that approach doesn't work anyway for most of the kids. Today, we are busy trying to assure that teachers know how to prepare well-organized lessons, but too many kids simply don't learn from well-organized lessons. Even if every teacher gave brilliant lectures, 80 percent of the kids would not learn because most kids do not learn through lectures. We need new school structures that create teams of adults, where the adults have differentiated responsibilities for working with kids. Such a model allows students to become more personally and directly involved with the curriculum and with each other, allows them to learn through a wider variety of means that just listening and reading, and gives the adults time to work with individual students and to talk with one another. If we had such a school, we would have to stop measuring the way kids learn by the way we learn. We would need new ways of evaluating learning, methods more suited than are multiple choice tests for evaluating the diverse ways in which learning would occur. These are some of the changes I think we must begin to explore and implement. ●

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