

MEMO

From . . . PETER LAARMAN

To Al Shanker, Gene Kemble

DATE Sept. 15

The attached is a rough edit of the speech to the NIE testing confab.

Since the rhythms of speech do not lend themselves to reformulation as an essay, I think this should be packaged as something along the lines of "Al Shanker Talks About Tests and Testing" with the subtitle, "Excerpts to the National Institute of Education's National Testing Conference" and the date, which I don't remember.

We have photos which I would intersperse and also would highlight some of the better quotations.

Comments please.

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AFL-CIO

1979(?) your copy
TO Phyllis

Phyllis -
ask me
about this.
P.L.

Shanker
speeches

I think it is fair to say that in the last 20 years or so there has been a dramatic--yes, indeed a radical change--in the way the public views our schools and our teachers. And in a democratic society one must pay attention to such a change in views on the part of the public.

I think that perhaps the most important reason why teachers have fallen many notches and are no longer on a pedestal and why the view of the schools are somewhat different is that, ironically, we have been very, very successful. ^{And} We have lowered ourselves and we have subjected our institution to greater criticism because we have a society where everyone has been educated and they no longer look up at us. They look down at us. And many of the people in our country who graduated ^{from} college feel that they could do a much better job educating their own children than the teachers could but they're too busy making too much money, so they can't afford to take the time off.

A second thing that we ought to take note of is that we have gone through a 20-year period when so-called counter-culture or New Left critics have had a very significant impact on the thought of people within this country. If you go to any book store or library and look at what's been published in the last 15 years or so on education, you will see all of these schooling books, all of the works written by people who were teachers for four weeks or six weeks before they were fired. And then after they were fired they wrote a book saying that the reason they were fired is that they were the only real teachers who loved children; that everyone else in the school was destroying the children.

Now, fortunately, not so many people read those books, but they nevertheless have had a great influence, and I would say a very negative one because by and large they--the New Left and counter-culture--were not really criticizing what we're doing. They reject the values of our society.

~~And it is.~~ It was something which wealthier people were attracted to, but working people have always rejected this because they still see the schools as a way for their children to learn and to work within our society and to achieve within it.

Now there is a third factor that has to do with the defensiveness of the educational establishment (and I certainly include teachers in that group). We protest that these things aren't scientific, that we really don't know anything about what makes teachers tick, we don't know anything about what makes children learn. And, therefore, you shouldn't attack us because nobody really knows anything, and tests don't tell us anything. They're subject to misinterpretation and there are a lot of errors. And, therefore, you shouldn't criticize us because really this whole thing is subjective--that's your opinion, and that's your opinion, and there's a third opinion out there. And that sounds like a wonderful defense! After all, how can anyone criticize you for not doing something if you don't know what you're doing?

Unfortunately, that conclusion is very soon reached by people when you use that sort of a defense: that if you don't know what you're doing, why should you be certified, why should you have a right to a job, why should the taxpayer pay any money?

Then, of course, we have the traditional notion that the big thing you have to do is to innovate, to bring in new ideas every year and throw out the old ideas every year. And very rarely does any educator stand up in a community and say, 'Look, we're not going to get rid of most of the things we've been doing because they're pretty good. And we know what we're doing. And they work pretty well.' I don't know what you'd think of a

doctor if you went to him and he said, 'I know exactly what you're suffering from. And you see those pills over there? Those are the pills that every other doctor in the country would give you, and they will cure you within 24 hours. But I'm not that kind of a doctor. I'm an innovator.'

Our problem is we never admit failure. No superintendent of schools, no school board member, no teacher will ever be considered a great educator by admitting that he has done something which did not work. And so all the public relations goes out. And, of course, there's the greatest innovation of ~~law~~ ^{all which is} that every few years we get rid of the superintendent of schools. And we hire the one who is being fired from some other school district.

Then, of course, we also have more openness. Test results today are not the private domain of the teacher's records or the school's records. And we have a good deal of ignorance as to what test results mean. And I'm sure that all of you have seen from time to time the crazy headline which announces that the school system of the country is failing because half of the children have scored below average in reading or some other field. And so we have some education to do as to what averages mean and what tests are about.

More importantly, we need to develop a certain perspective, a certain direction, and a certain basic commitment. And I believe that if we start from that perspective and commitment that many other things will follow. There will still be room for disagreement on particular items. But it seems to me that at least one thing ought to be settled, and that is that while teaching, like medicine and other fields, is a rather complicated art, it is nevertheless possible to develop a body of knowledge on what constitutes good teaching. It is possible to develop a model of competent teaching practice over a period of time, and we ought to admit that we haven't done

it up to now. We ought to admit that we have not done it because people have been afraid. Yes, teachers have been afraid that they would lose their jobs, and school board members have been afraid that they would be turned out in the next election, and superintendents have been afraid that they would be involved in a game of musical chairs, moving over to some other school district.

But it is about time we stopped being afraid and started admitting our failures. We should agree that we will keep those things which for years and years have worked in the classroom. We will not place an emphasis on throwing out good things for the sake of innovation. Without taking such a view, we are involved in a pure subjectivism which is anti-intellectual and anti-professional and anti-institutional.

Of course, there's very little point in trying to define effective teaching unless you can make certain assumptions about the teaching force. The first thing one would like to take for granted is basic competence in the subject or subjects to be taught. There was a time when a college degree would serve as proof of competence.

Unfortunately, during the 1960's and as a result of the student rebellions, many colleges and universities softened their academic requirements and began inflating grades so that you no longer are very sure what an undergraduate degree means.

Now we have in many states doctors who have to take examinations after they've gone to medical school and lawyers who have to take bar exams after they've gone to law school. And people in various states have to take examinations to become hairdressers, to be insurance agents, and all sorts of things. So it doesn't do anything for the profession and it undermines the feeling of the public toward teachers when we say that there is something

terrible and demeaning about having a person who is to enter this field take a test. Not that there is any test that will tell us whether the person is going to be a good teacher--that we will find out later. But there is something that will tell you whether a math teacher knows enough math and whether an English teacher knows enough English and whether a Social Studies teacher knows enough Social Studies. And anyone who takes the position that teachers upon entry should not be asked to demonstrate ^{Subject matter competence} ~~that~~ is lowering the status of the schools in this country and of teachers and their professionalism.

The simple fact is that testing is an indispensable element of the educational process. The question is not whether to test but how to interpret the results and use the instruments most effectively. Here is a place where the federal government can do something. We need programs for teachers to acquaint them with what tests are about and how they can be used and how they can affect classroom practice. And I think we need programs for the education of the press and other media across the country. I think parents, of course, and the general community as well need education about what tests are and what their limits are. You could call this a truth-in-testing proposal. Call it what you will, it's badly needed.

Yes, we ought to strive to develop new tests and to improve tests. But we should not say that because we do not have a perfect instrument that we're going to abandon those we have at the present time. The ones we have now tell us something. They don't tell us everything. And no one in the world throws out an imperfect instrument because he doesn't have a perfect one. It's like saying that you can get rid of the unemployment problem by firing the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It's kind of silly.

Any organization that says let's get rid of these tests until we have

the public
perfect ones is inviting ¹ to feel that schools have been a terrible failure. That organization is just trying to bury the evidence. And I don't think any of us should be in that position.

I do think that as we move ahead with testing programs and with research and with building a science of education, we have to provide some security for the people who are in key positions, and that includes teachers and board members and administrators. They have to feel that by admitting failure and by moving ahead they're not going to be punished for doing the right thing. Public education has been under attack for so long that no reforms are possible without a ^{non-threatening} ~~change of~~ atmosphere. But with good faith on all sides, we can begin to improve performance without destroying people's careers.