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STATEMENT FOR THE ANNUAL HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE SERIES
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by Albert Shanker, President
American Federation of Teachers,
AFL-CIO

Contact person: Eugenia Kemble
797-4485

Proposing effective methods for improving American education cannot be done without first arriving at an accurate assessment of what the problems are. If what is wrong is the result of the failure of national policies, rather than state or local ones, then the solutions should be national in scope and the prescriptions should be federally legislated and financed rather than decentralized in the way that has characterized educational governance up until now.

I would argue first of all that public education in America is not in as bad shape as the media and education's detractors would have us believe. Today America has a literacy rate of 98.2%, up from 55% in 1945. Public education is the institution which more than any other has brought depressed minorities into the mainstream of our society. Over half our high school graduates go on to higher education -- a record among the industrialized nations of the world. All of this has been accomplished without federally established minimum education standards, without a uniform system of financing, and without national standards for the certification of school teachers.

There are real problems. But, I do not believe they have been caused by our form of educational governance. I would point to the following priorities for any educational improvement agenda:

- a) quality problems caused by the growth of soft electives, a decline in foreign language study, social promotion practices, quota policies, the decline of the humanities, the anti-testing movement, funding shortages relative to legislative mandates, teacher stress, and the declining status of teaching as a profession.

- b) student discipline, which more than any other school problem has contributed to public concern about the schools. For more than ten years discipline has topped the Gallup poll on education as the issue deserving the most criticism. A closely related issue is the degree to which the public schools have fallen down in their responsibility to educate on values associated with good citizenship.
- c) funding to meet the needs of special populations, and to fully fund legislated program mandates in the areas of bilingual education, education for the handicapped, education for the disadvantaged, etc.

With the exception of funding federally legislated mandates, all of these problems are better solved at the state and local levels. American education is decentralized at least in part because the Constitution did not make education a federal responsibility. The values and views of states and local communities were thought to be not only the strength of the system, but its protection from over-centralization and decision by arbitrary bureaucratic fiat.

Minimum educational standards established nationally, or uniform financing, or national certification standards are both unnecessary and dangerous. A public school system is most responsive if its decisions are made close to the constituents it serves. In fact, the fact that the federal government has been over-zealous thus far in such areas as bilingual education, is an indicator of its potential for future mistakes should it play too dominant a role.

National education standards and uniform financing are just one step toward national testing and a nationalized curriculum. Since the business of education remains a pluralistic and diversified business precisely because there is no one way to do things and no single standard of judgement to be applied, I view moves in this direction to be oversimplified and misdirected.

Why not supply the funds to allow for problem solving at the state and local level? Why not provide federal and other funds that would allow school systems

to devise better disciplinary procedures, alternative programs for disruptive students, improved curriculum including foreign language study and concentration on the basics? But the degree to which decisions about the substance of such programs can remain localized is the degree to which they will engender the kind of local commitment that will make them successful. In select problem areas federal funds should have strings attached, but to make such an approach total and uniform would create more dangers than it is worth.

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