

STATEMENT OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS, AFL-CIO  
DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM COMMITTEE

June 12, 1984

Thank you, on behalf of the American Federation of Teachers for this opportunity to appear and present our views on the 1984 Democratic Platform. We know this Committee has taken pains to make sure that everyone in the Democratic Party has had an opportunity to express their views and influence the Party's premier political document. This public and open process stands in stark contrast to the procedures employed by the Republican Party. No one knows when or where their Platform Committee meets or who is a member of that body. Plans for public hearings have been announced and then cancelled, and the Republicans have made it clear that they do not wish to be bothered by outsiders. The Democratic Platform should stand in sharp contrast in substance as well as in the procedures used to draft it.

The Democratic Platform for 1984 should be a document that represents the Party's commitment to its constituency and to the nation. Contrary to the views expressed by the Republicans, and even by some in our own Party, the needs of the constituencies that form the Democratic Party are not special interest but national interests. When you write a Platform that commits the Party to fighting unemployment, as I know you will, what you are really doing is making a commitment to the nation for a fair economic policy for all our citizens. When the Democratic Platform calls for a revitalized federal commitment to improving our system of education, you are making a commitment to the future

of the entire nation.

Education is not a special interest of the few in our society. Education has been the key to success for our nation of immigrant's. Public education has been the institution that molded people from many diverse backgrounds into one nation.

As we approach the midpoint of the 1980's, our economy and our society are changing in ways that we could not have predicted only a few years ago. It is very likely that those of us in our 40's and 50's are the last generation of Americans who will spend most of our working lives doing one job. Change is occurring so fast and in ways so basic that future generations will almost certainly have two or three careers in a working life. Only a system of public education dedicated to quality and designed to meet these changes will be able to serve our nation in the 1980's. People will need the opportunity to acquire new skills as our job market undergoes change ever more rapidly.

In the past, education has been at the heart of American economic growth and prosperity. It has been estimated that 40% of U.S. economic growth since WW II is attributable to education. It is well understood that education does not cost, rather it pays dividends for the whole society. The G.I. Bill for WWII veterans produced \$14 in new tax revenues for every one dollar the government invested. Education is clearly the prime supply-side investment.

Unfortunately, at this critical time in our nation's history we are saddled with an Administration and President who do not really believe that we need to invest in the skills and education

of all our citizens.

The Reagan Administration has been in the forefront of efforts to limit educational opportunities and if their plans had succeeded they would have virtually eliminated the federal role in education.

Prior to President Reagan, the role of the federal government in education was a limited, but important, one. The federal government aided those students and their families whose needs were increased access to education and equity in the distribution of educational services. Federal programs were, for the most part, designed to facilitate one or the other of these two goals.

Programs on the books such as ESEA Chapter I and P.L. 94-142 the Education For All Handicapped Children Act, have fulfilled their roles well. We in the AFT had criticisms from time to time of how these programs functioned, but we never questioned their goals of providing federal aid to assure that educationally disadvantaged or handicapped students received additional help.

Ronald Reagan's Administration, however, does not endorse providing federal aid for access and equity. One of the first actions taken by the Reagan Administration, in 1981, was to seek Draconian cuts in education programs and to lump the surviving programs into Block Grants without goals or purposes. Education cuts were justified by President Reagan as necessary to get the federal budget under control. Facts have shown however, that their real goal was to take federal dollars out of programs that serve all of our children to aid the 10% of our students and families who use private schools. No other conclusion can be

drawn from the available evidence. Every President saves his State of the Union Address to highlight the most important goals of his Administration. For three consecutive years the President's major education goal has been Tuition Tax Credits for private schools. Recently, conversion of Aid for the Educationally Disadvantaged into a voucher program was added to the agenda. For public schools the President advocates prayer. This year the strategy has changed. It is clear that the President views education as an important election year issue. And so it is. The Reagan strategy is to convince the public that he really cares about improving education. This strategy may succeed if the Democratic Party does not add a new goal to the traditional quest for access and equity. That goal is quality.

Many Democratic Governors have taken the lead on behalf of educational quality. The 1984 Platform should acknowledge that quality public education is a major concern of the Democratic Party. While most education reform issues are state responsibilities, the Platform should point out that major improvements in teacher starting salaries and in upgrading the academic standards for entry level teachers are very much in the national interest.

President Reagan has received a great deal of publicity by pressing for "merit pay." He has used the "merit pay" slogan as a kind of shorthand for expressing his concern about educational quality. "Merit pay" is not an answer for our education's problems, a real commitment to quality education is more than an exercise in laying blame. Our 1984 Platform must establish this

crucial difference.

In America education has long been the first step towards independence and the full participation in all the benefits of American citizenship. Our education system has taken waves of immigrants from all over the world and provided them with the tools to succeed in America. That process continues today. All of our citizens new and old are in need of an education system of the highest quality. It is plain that the Reagan Administration holds out no hope to them. In the words of New York Governor Mario Cuomo--It is the philosophy of the Republicans that 'God helps those whom God has helped,' or if you don't have it already don't look to them for help.

The Democratic Party can make a huge difference in 1984. We can keep faith with our heritage and provide for the future by strengthening the federal government's role in education.

Instead of offering tax-exemptions to schools that discriminate, as the President attempted, the Democratic Party should stand for a strong enforcement program against all forms of discrimination. While Reagan seeks to destroy programs for public schools in order to pay for Tuition Tax Credits and vouchers for private schools, the Democratic Party should make it plain that federal help is for those who need it most. While the Reagan Administration seeks to eliminate higher education aid, the Democratic Party should state that higher education must be available for all who can benefit from it and that the entire society benefits from higher education spending. 1984 is crucial. If an investment is not made in the education, health and training of our children and our workforce, the country will

suffer a loss for many years to come. Education and training mean higher productivity for our industry, greater strength for our nation internationally. Education does not cost--it pays, it is the best kind of supply side investment available.

Thank you.

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