

Albert Shanker Address to the Commonwealth Club of California
April 16, 1986, San Francisco

Teachers and the Business Community: A Common
Denominator for Success in Education

This month marks the third anniversary of the release of the Reagan administration's Nation at Risk Report (April 26 to be exact).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education report of April 1983 prompted a flood of reform in U.S. schools--not the tidal wave that was called for but at the very least it awakened many Americans to the pressing need to move away from the malaise of mediocrity that had swept our schools.

The Nation at Risk Report ushered in dozens of other studies on our education system. Nearly all called for tighter standards, greater emphasis on the basics, more discipline, more homework and a recognition that teacher salaries had to be increased.

The AFT, when the Risk report and others were released, voiced its support for the findings and mobilized efforts within our union as well as externally through the news media, with state legislators, governors and the business community to generate immediate follow-up.

And, we have been successful. The statistics speak for themselves. South Carolina -- a 32 percent increase in education funding in just one year, teacher pay up 33 percent in Texas in a year, education spending up 12 percent in California in a year.

And when we look at the efforts put forth in California, we have to trace part of the success to the business community which through the California Roundtable in 1983 championed the cause of education by pushing for passage of Senate Bill 813, the major school finance and reform bill that pumped billions of new dollars into your schools.

California business leaders realized that education must be at the forefront of the transformation of America's economy.

Nationally, in the past three years, we have accomplished a lot. Course requirements have been stiffened, pay has gone up for teachers (about 20 percent) and new standards have been adopted in most states. Exciting partnerships have been formed with the business community and new alliances with parents and teachers have been established.

But, much more is required. The world economy is in the midst of a total transformation. The economies of the petroleum industry are destabilized and changes in international trade are reshaping the structure of international economic competition.

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For years America led the world in productivity.

But, things have changed dramatically. If America wants to compete in the global economy and be the leader in the next century, we have to fully come to grips with the issues of quality and equality in education.

We cannot be satisfied with the status quo and quite frankly that's what we have returned to in education in the past three years.

It is more than repairing our school system. We need a complete overhaul. If we are to prepare our children to be productive citizens in the 21st century, we must tool them with the best education possible. The same kind of education now reserved for a fortunate few must be afforded to all. If we fail to act, we will continue to see a steady erosion in our standard of living.

What I am calling for is a second American revolution and the leaders of that revolution must come from the forces of the teaching profession if we are really going to reform and rebuild U.S. education. Revolution is no exaggeration; that's what is needed to make teaching a profession and to attract people of professional stature into our ranks. The revolution must be dramatic: it must be thorough and it must be now.

The future depends on the teachers. If our teaching profession is not well educated, our students will be shortchanged. If we don't have the best and brightest as educators, we will muddle into the next century with mediocrity continuing to be the trademark.

In 1985, I began using my post as president of the AFT to send a few shock waves around America on how to revolutionize the teaching profession. I called for a new and rigorous exam for teachers on par with procedures used to certify doctors and lawyers. I called for the establishment of a national board to take charge of teacher certification and professional practices within teaching.

The proposals I floated received immediate support from newspaper editors, governors and the like.

The Dallas Morning News said: "you can almost hear Americans nodding their heads in agreement" and the Philadelphia Inquirer said: "If Shanker has his way, teachers of the future will be far better prepared to meet the needs of students across the country."

I want to report to you today that I believe the fermenting of the revolution in teaching is in its embryonic stage.

During the past year, the Carnegie Forum on Education and Economy and the prestigious Carnegie Corporation established a blue ribbon task force on the teaching profession made up of governors, business leaders, teacher union leaders like myself and others to begin laying the foundation for the so-called revolution.

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The task force is now wrapping up its work and will report its findings in mid-May in San Diego at a national forum which will lay out how teachers must be the pioneering force behind the economic transformation taking place in the world today. The findings will be earth shattering. If they are heeded, and I believe through Carnegie and others in the business community, lawmakers and teacher leaders, a revolutionary tidal wave will begin to sweep education.

Something else has taken place in the past year, right here in California with the findings of the California Commission on the Teaching Profession.

The Commission in November released a blockbuster report which called for turning teaching into a true profession by making it self-governing in the same way other professions are.

Just months after the release of the report State Senators Gary Hart and Marian Bergeson introduced Senate Bills 1604 and 1605 which address 10 of the Commission's 27 recommendations.

AFT affiliates in California and the San Francisco Federation of Teachers support this legislation on the state level as well as local initiatives to reduce class size.

The nation's business leaders realize that their support is crucial to shaping the educational future of America. That's why the Committee for Economic Development, a coalition of Fortune 500 companies, said recently the price of failure is too high.

The business community is firmly convinced that one important reason for our growing inability to compete in world markets has been the inadequacy of our education system.

The case for business involvement not only centers on the benefits business derives from education, but also on what it can contribute. School management and organization can be strengthened through application of new management techniques and business planning techniques can also help schools prepare better for the future as new demographic forces radically change the makeup of our student and teacher population.

Like CED said recently, "a firm and enduring commitment to excellence in education on the part of America's business community is not merely a matter of philanthropy; it is enlightened self-interest."

If the revolution is to succeed, business will want to team up with teachers and teacher unions like AFT. Together we can be the leaders of this long-delayed crusade.

California is full of some outstanding examples of business initiatives directed towards education. I referred at the outset to the California Roundtable's successful work in generating support for school reform in the 1983 Legislature. There are other examples. . .

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The California Commission on the Teaching Profession was made up of executives from Pacific Bell, Hewlett-Packard, and Clorox Company.

Here in San Francisco, the San Francisco Federation of Teachers has obtained thousands of dollars worth of donated goods from businesses for classroom use. In fact, Reggie Martinez, a city teacher, who is heading up that project called BASIC (Business Aiding Students to Increase Competency) is in the audience today.

And the SFFT is linking up with business leaders to support Senate Bill 1604 to reduce class size to a 20 to 1 ratio.

Teamwork is required if the revolution is to succeed and the soldiers in this war must be our teachers and the business community.

Several years ago, Florida Governor Bob Graham launched a P.R. campaign to gain support for education reform. He called it "Education Means Business."

He was right on the mark. Put another way: when American business talks, people listen. In looking ahead to the next century when American business and teachers talk, our society must listen and respond. To turn a deaf ear, our nation's future is in jeopardy.

Now, I will be glad to take your questions.

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