

**Testimony of Albert Shanker
President, American Federation of Teachers
to the
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
March 19, 1987**

My name is Albert Shanker, and I am president of the 635,000 member American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. The AFT has a keen interest in the issue of education reform, and we have been recognized widely as a leader in this movement. On behalf of our members, I appreciate this opportunity to address you.

The issue before you, the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy's Task Force on the Teaching Profession's A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century, is one which promises to revolutionize the way we think about public education in this country. The report's recommendations, which I will discuss in more detail later, include establishing a National Board of Professional Teaching Standards and restructuring American public schools.

To fully understand the potential impact the proposals in A Nation Prepared can have on both public schools and the teaching profession, we first need to take a closer look at the present condition of American public education.

It has been four years since the beginning of the education reform movement. Since the release of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, A Nation at Risk, significant progress has been made in the schools. Course requirements have been stiffened; standards for entering teachers have been raised in some states; teacher salaries have gone up in many states;

Page 2

and concern with the quality of education has become a major issue again all over the country.

In addition, important new alliances between the business and education communities have been formed. Keenly aware that economic competitiveness rests on an educated workforce, many in the business community have moved beyond token gestures to serious support for public education.

Although the first wave of the education reform movement brought bad along with the good, on balance it was positive -- and certainly necessary. It did not, however, go far enough. Why? Because even if all the best of the reforms recommended over the last few years were adopted, that would, at best, bring us back to the schools we had in the 1940s and '50s.

Many of you remember those schools. They certainly worked for those of us in this room. They did not, however, work for the majority of Americans. For even in the so-called golden days of American public education, this nation had about a 70% dropout rate. In a sense, the nation could "afford" that statistic in those days. It cannot, and should not, tolerate that now.

Is this what the education reform movement is all about? The 21st century will not be like the 1940s and 1950s. Citizens will face new social, economic and political realities and challenges. Given this, should we go back to the "good old" schools we used to have? Of course not. But that is exactly what we will do if we don't go beyond most of the early reform reports.

Page 3

If we in education, government, and business are serious about reform, we must be unmercifully honest about the problems we face. Otherwise, we are dealing only with slogans and wishes. A Nation Prepared puts forth concrete proposals for meeting the challenges facing public education. Affirming that we cannot afford to implement reforms that simply tinker with the status quo, A Nation Prepared offers new ways of doing things. It is not a report that can be summed up in one or two columns or speeches. Schooling is a complex issue -- as are the problems facing it -- and one of the virtues of the report is that it does not try to oversimplify the issues.

Following a brief description of the problems facing public education, I will highlight the Carnegie Task Force's vision of the future of American public education.

The first problem that the report takes on is that, given the way schools are currently organized, there is no way we can get the enormous numbers of talented teachers we need. There simply will not be enough high-caliber college graduates available to us. In the next ten years, no single sector of the economy -- not medicine, not industry, not transportation, not law and the judiciary, not the military -- can successfully bid for almost one quarter of the country's graduates, which is about what education will need. The numbers just do not add up.

Secondly, even assuming we could capture one-quarter of the country's college educated workforce, if we simply placed them into the existing structure of our schools and told them to do their best, their best would not be good enough. That structure, and the rigid confining approach to teaching and learning that it imposes, never did work well for more than a minority of our students.

America's schools, both public and private, are about the only institutions in our society which look and operate pretty much the way they did over 200 years ago. To enable us to meet the challenges of the next century, the Carnegie report calls for sweeping structural changes in the teaching profession and in the ways that schools are managed and organized.

The Carnegie approach to education reform assumes that there can be no real improvement in education without high quality teachers. And the way to get and keep such teachers is to select and treat them the way we do other professionals. Among other changes, this involves transforming the factory-like set up in schools where teachers are treated like mere hired hands required to follow orders from above and developing schools in which teachers are trusted to exercise judgment based on their expertise. It calls for raising standards and salaries and for putting teacher certification into the hands of the teaching profession itself, just as lawyers, doctors, accountants and other professionals have done.

The report's recommendation to create a National Board of Professional Teaching Standards is in the process of being implemented. This will be a national, non-governmental board composed of a majority of outstanding teachers. It will set standards for what teachers ought to know and be able to do. Based on those, it will develop and administer a national certifying examination for teachers comparable to the bar and other professional exams.

Of all the reforms recommended by the Carnegie Forum's report, the National Board has perhaps received the most attention. For this reason, there are some specific details about the board which deserve a closer look. First, board certification will be an entirely voluntary process. Whether or not to pursue certification will be a decision left to individual teachers.

Second, the board will be certifying teachers; licensing will still be handled at the state level. But if the history of other professions serves as a guide, if board certification develops a reputation for assuring a high level of quality, most states will come to require it as a condition for licensure. The national board could provide all states with a sophisticated exam that rests on a substantial knowledge base. A quality assurance signal to the public, the standards would be visible and verifiable.

Carnegie also has a vision of a school of the future, a future that should not be very far away. In this new school, students are not batch processed. They learn individually. Learning may occasionally come from a formal lecture, but it can also come from reading, writing, games, video cassettes, computer programs, peer tutoring, or through individualized and small group assistance from paraprofessionals and interns who are preparing to become teachers.

Teaching would not mean primarily lecturing, imparting information to basically passive students. Rather it would mean connecting students with the appropriate materials, resource persons, experiences and, if one approach doesn't work, trying another. This structure would give teachers time to work with students individually or in small groups to develop critical thinking, effective writing and expression, and persuasion skills. Teachers would also have time for professional relationships with colleagues, time to evaluate materials and technology and time to train interns.

The central function of the professional teaching staff would be to shape the climate and the structure of their school and its curriculum; teachers would be responsible for developing the best learning program for each child and seeing that it is executed.

The impact on students would be electrifying. Students learn at different paces and in different ways. Most students need

Page 7

more time in some subjects than in others, and different children learn in different ways. Some students learn best by reading a chapter in a book, others by watching a videotape or by using programmed instruction on a computer. Some children can best master new material by teaching it to younger students, by reviewing it in a structured coaching session, or by analyzing it in a teacher-led seminar. Some students can pace their efforts over a five-month semester; others need the sharper incentive of shorter time spans. The rigidity of the current structure forces us to try to fit these very different children into the same mold. The fit often isn't a good one.

Of course, this is a vision. We should not abandon the schools we have for those which do not yet exist. But the next few years can be the most important in the history of American education if individual school districts all over the country would allow teachers and administrators to develop such new models. Nothing less will enable us to educate all children, not just a few. And nothing less will enable us to meet the challenge of securing for the future an economically strong, democratic America.