

Shanker

**TESTIMONY OF ALBERT SHANKER
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TO THE
DEMOCRATIC PARTY PLATFORM COMMITTEE
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My name is Albert Shanker, and I am president of the American Federation of Teachers/AFL-CIO. On behalf of the AFT, I greatly appreciate this opportunity to talk to you about the future of American public education and the Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party must provide Americans with a vision of a government that represents and sustains the fundamental rights and beliefs on which our democracy was built. As Chairman Paul Kirk has so eloquently stated, we need to create "a letter to the American people that can be bold and brief enough so that every American will want to read it and say, 'that's the American future in which I want my children to live and that's the political party in which I want to place my trust.'"

The values in this vision are not new to the Democratic Party or the AFT. They are the values around which our Constitution and Bill of Rights are based. They contain a fundamental recognition of the significance of the individual -- a value that is reflected in the establishment of a public school system that will meet the needs of each and every child in the country.

In May 1987, the AFT, along with Freedom House and the Educational Excellence Network, developed a consensus statement of American values that should underpin our public education

process. Signed by over 150 prominent Americans, the Education for Democracy: A Statement of Principles contains a vision of America that "includes a devotion to human dignity and freedom; to equal rights; to social and economic justice; to the rule of law; to civility and truth; to tolerance of diversity; to mutual assistance; to personal and civic responsibility; to self-restraint and self-respect -- all of which must be taught, learned and practiced. These principles cannot be taken for granted nor can they be substituted or held against each other."

A commitment to public education is one of the best ways to ensure that these principles are perpetuated, for it is our public schools that will transmit these values to each new generation. The Education for Democracy: A Statement of Principles argues that a strong public school system is the best way to teach students, both formally and by example, the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans. It is our public schools that bring an increasingly diverse people together and help fulfill our unique American heritage.

The Democratic Party has demonstrated its support for education by insisting that programs designed to promote educational access and equity not be eliminated as the Reagan administration wished. The Democratic members of the House and Senate led successful fights against tuition tax credits and voucher plans that were the cornerstones of the Reagan education program.

Now is the time to get off the defensive and advocate an education program that will serve the needs of our children and our nation. In addition to full funding for the programs now on the books, the AFT urges that another element be added to the federal role in education in its efforts to ensure educational excellence.

In order to succeed as a nation in the 21st century, we will need to draw on the resources of all our citizens. Currently, the schools only educate about 20 percent of our students to a competitive level. This level of success will not serve our country in an increasingly complex world. The federal role should include an accelerated research program and a program to encourage new models and approaches to teaching and learning to reach the 80 percent of the students who are not succeeding in the current system. Most institutions and industries in the United States, including defense, benefit from research. It helps make their processes and products stronger and better. The same will be true of education. Education currently represents a \$300 billion per year expenditure; only a tiny fraction of that amount is used for research. Granted, research and experimentation will not succeed overnight in reshaping our schools so that all students can succeed. But, we need to start down this difficult but necessary path, for schools will not change by themselves, and more of what we have now will not serve our nation well.

In addition, the AFT believes the Democratic Party must advocate a program for children and education that includes:

o A doubling of aid to programs that serve children with the greatest needs such as Chapter I, Head Start and Education for the Handicapped. New efforts are also needed to deal with the tragic shortage of high quality, safe and educationally sound day care programs. Programs aimed at child health and nutrition are also of the highest priority.

o Continued support for programs that allow qualified students to attend college, such as Pell Grants, student loans and other programs for higher education. In addition, higher education programs should be expanded to allow adult learners to return to school and pursue the new skills that will be necessary for employment in our increasingly technical society.

o Emphasis on attracting high quality individuals to the ranks of the teaching profession. This means support for programs that provide scholarships for high-achieving students desiring to become teachers and federal support for the research efforts of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The work of that board in setting standards is critical to efforts to upgrade the teaching profession.

o Investment in job training for those who are in the workforce but unable to find work. This package should include assistance for workers who are displaced, youth who

have never been in the workforce and mothers who want to work but cannot either because of a lack of skills or a lack of affordable child care.

In sum, education has been the key to success in American society for many years. The unprecedented economic growth and prosperity enjoyed by Americans since the end of World War II has come to be taken for granted. It is my view that we have been living off the public investments made by great Democratic presidents such as Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy and Johnson. The physical infrastructure built for our nation by the New Deal, the massive educational investment in higher education known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, and the investments in human capital like Head Start and Chapter I that came from the Great Society have fueled our nation's economy. That fuel is running out.

The needs for social investment are huge and growing; they have been ignored over the last eight years. The platform of the 1988 Democratic campaign need not indulge in spelling out a detailed legislative program. The platform should, however, say this: We became an economic, political and military giant because of the foresight of Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy and Johnson. They believed the presidency should enrich our children, build our public facilities, support our economy and prepare our nation for the future.

The Democratic Party should reaffirm its historical role as the party that will provide the arena in which the needs of all our citizens can be addressed. If the platform reminds the American people of how our nation's success was achieved and how we can pass that success on to our children, we cannot lose the 1988 election.