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ALBERT SHANKER  
*President*

STATEMENT OF ALBERT SHANKER, PRESIDENT  
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS, AFL-CIO  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

*Shanker*  
I am Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers. The AFT represents more than 700,000 primary and secondary school teachers, paraprofessionals and other school employees, college faculty, state employees and health care professionals. We appreciate the opportunity to present the AFT's views on this important issue.

The issue before this Committee, the expansion of our national commitment to community service, is an important matter to the AFT. We commend Members of this Committee, as well as other Members of Congress, who have recognized that this is an area that would benefit from federal attention.

The AFT strongly supports the concept of national and community service. Our members entered their respective

professions because of a belief in public service. AFT members frequently see the benefits of community service. On a daily basis, volunteers, often parents, work in our schools and make them better places for their own and others' children.

Over a quarter a century ago, President Kennedy said we should ask what we could do for our country. This challenge, which served as a beacon for national and community service to an entire generation of Americans, is in need of renewal today. With the establishment of the Peace Corps, VISTA and ACTION, millions of people both here and in other parts of the world have been enriched and have benefited by the work and idealism of those who responded to President Kennedy's challenge.

The time has come to reawaken the spirit of service to nation and to community once again. In doing so, however, we ask that any new legislation take into account the changes in American society that have occurred since the 1960's. Any new program must be careful to carve out a role for national and community service that is consistent with other concerns of our country.

Several of the bills before this Congress represent an excellent approach to establishing a positive community service program. Some of the proposals encourage schools and community based agencies to develop self-sufficient local projects to create new opportunities for students and out-of-school youth to serve their communities. Others would create service opportunities for citizens of all ages, allowing weekend, part-time and vacation service. One proposal would encourage

adults to volunteer in schools, forging partnerships between schools and other groups. Other proposals would provide educational benefits supplementing existing need-based aid. All of these approaches have promise. They offer a real opportunity for our youth to obtain or continue their education, to enter the world of work and to provide a service to their country.

While the AFT strongly supports the concept of national and community service, we emphatically oppose any program that would condition student eligibility for financial assistance on the performance of community, national or military service. Further, we must be careful not to create any program which would, in effect, displace low-wage and low-skilled workers. Community service should complement the work of regular public service employees. Any new initiative must avoid displacement of existing workers.

The AFT is troubled by The Citizen and National Service Act introduced by Representative McCurdy and Senator Nunn. That bill would cash out existing federal student assistance programs and make national service the sole basis on which students would qualify for federal financial assistance. Rather than serve as a beacon for young people to contribute to their community, this approach could reduce educational opportunities instead of increasing them. The AFT has supported the G.I. bill for Vietnam Veterans and the new G.I. bill recently enacted by Congress. Our Union believes that the nation should reward those who have served in the military and in civilian capacity for their contribution. However, cashing out critical student

assistance programs in order to pay for past service is a flawed approach.

While we commend Representative McCurdy and Senator Nunn for helping to bring this issue to national attention, we oppose dismantling a proven system of support for students in higher education. The new G.I. Bill, existing student aid programs and new assistance from community service should all have a place in the array of programs that serve our nation's educational, military and service needs.

Because this bill would deny financial assistance until national service has been completed, the net effect would be to establish mandatory service for all students who need federal assistance to pursue higher education while high school graduates from higher-income families would enjoy greater access to college because of artificially reduced competition. With the rising costs of a college education, the number of low-and middle-income students who will be in a position to attend college without financial aid will continue to diminish. Recent studies have found that students' chances of obtaining a higher education are better if they enter college immediately after high school. AFT strongly supports efforts to provide non-traditional students with opportunities for higher education. It would be a mistake, however, to build a new barrier to college attendance after high school for low-and middle-income American youth.

While the current student aid system is not perfect, it has assisted millions of students who otherwise would not have been

able to attend college. We recommend that any national service program that provides benefits be structured so that all who wish to pursue their education and perform service after college be allowed to dedicate their accrued benefits toward retiring their educational loans.

It is no secret that at this juncture, Congress does not have the money to develop and implement a comprehensive community service program.

In the absence of resources for a comprehensive program, AFT believes that new legislation should give school-based community service programs a high priority. Much has been made of our nation's staggering budget and trade deficits. Recent studies by the National Assessment of Educational Progress also demonstrate a massive national education deficit. Our country is behind virtually all of its competitors in the most critical educational skills of its youth. The number of at-risk and out-of-school youths is growing. Youth unemployment remains high, and the educational skills our nation will need to compete in the 21st Century are lacking even in our high school graduates.

Any school-based service program should aim to: (1) encourage students and adults to participate in school and community service activities; (2) enhance educational achievement; and (3) contribute to the skills and productivity of young people about to enter the work force. Each program should also have a component targeted at students who need help most.

In structuring such a program, several issues need to be addressed. First and foremost, I would encourage the expansion of existing school-based programs which have proven to be successful. Many successful programs are operating throughout the country and thousands of students are engaged in a wide range of activities, including tutoring other students and adults, public service work in hospitals, libraries and senior citizens centers. Others volunteer to man "hotlines," helping youngsters in crisis or checking in on "latchkey" children. Other programs are targeted for at-risk youth, including many conservation corps programs. AFT locals in several cities maintain educational assistance hotlines for parents and students in need of help with school work. There is no reason why this work cannot be expanded to include young people who have the capacity to help other students.

The issue of whether community service should be voluntary or a mandatory requirement for students seeking to graduate from high school should be left to the schools and to educators who must determine how such a program should fit into the school's primary educational mission. Schools should be encouraged to implement such programs and several of the proposals before Congress will help in this regard. If community service programs are to be offered for academic credit, it is imperative that program content in developing the curriculum for such programs meet the standards applied to other programs providing academic credit. A community service course, alone, would be of little value to students. It is only when such courses are

connected with a student's other experiences within the school and within the community that the goals of school-based service programs will be realized.

As you examine the various options for school-based projects, one approach that should be examined is the so-called ServNet Project in President Bush's community service proposal. As I understand that proposal it encourages business and other groups to donate the services of talented personnel. Schools experiencing shortages in certain areas - for example, in math, science and languages - would benefit from skilled volunteers. While this type of sharing will not relieve the shortages of qualified personnel the schools now face, it can help in the short run.

Students, parents and members of the public and private sector should be encouraged to volunteer, and schools should develop programs aimed at establishing teams to work in these shortage areas. A team approach will be needed since many people who are qualified in specific subject matters will not have the teaching skills to effectively pass their knowledge on. Members of the business community could help develop programs aimed at improving a student's skills in the target area through local service projects. In the last several years, the AFT has entered into some very exciting and innovative projects with the private sector, and I am convinced that the resources of the business community can help solve some of the problems faced by schools with personnel shortages.



In a school-based community service program, the issue of training is also important. Volunteers will need to work with experienced teachers in order to take maximum advantage of the time and skills being volunteered. The challenge here is great as there is presently very little in the way of training for programs of this type.

To summarize, a national service program should contribute to the skills and productivity of young people entering the work force. It should remove, not add, barriers to students who want a higher education. Educational benefits which are linked with voluntary service should be viewed as an addition to and not a replacement of student financial assistance programs. Congress should encourage school-based programs which enhance and support programs that are already underway.

National service legislation that enhances educational achievement and workforce productivity can be an important element in efforts to better meet some of the needs of students and improve the educational and job skills of at-risk youth. We believe that it makes good sense to focus community service legislation on just a few achievable but important goals. This legislation is a good place to begin the process of concentrating our efforts on the most pressing needs.