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PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

**Submitted to the National Governors' Association
in Preparation for the
White House Education Summit**

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As the nation's governors prepare to meet with the President, I am pleased to offer the AFT's views on the state of public education today and on the course of action we as a nation should take to solve our educational crisis. A proper review of this situation would take far longer than these few pages will allow. Nevertheless, I can outline a framework of the issues and thinking that I believe should underlie the President's Education Summit. Our views reflect the experience and ideas of our union's 710,000 members and the input of many others in the educational community, in business and other sectors. I hope these thoughts prove useful to you.

...On National Goals and Standards

- o We are the only industrialized country that does not have a national/regional/state curriculum. We have had an education reform movement for six years and still have not focused on the issue of what we want students to know and be able to do .
- o By now, states and districts have fat books of curriculum guidelines and behavioral and skills objectives where the essential and the trivial are indistinguishable. It is impossible for teachers to cover all this in a meaningful and coherent way. Consequently, teachers have to decide what's important--and, too frequently, the textbook and test publishers decide for them. We minutely regulate how teachers teach, but in the main do not care what they teach, so long as it fits with the standardized multiple-choice tests.
- o We need to do just the opposite: Develop a national consensus about what students should know and be able to do--leaving enough room for states, localities and individual schools to respond to the diversity in our nation--and quit regulating how teachers teach.

...On Assessment and Accountability

- o We cannot have a meaningful system of assessment until we know what we want students to know and be able to do, and we cannot have meaningful accountability until we have decent assessments.
- o If assessments act as incentives--and they do--then what we have is a system of incentives that encourages schools to concentrate on low-level skills that can be demonstrated on multiple-choice tests. Until we produce better assessments that encourage and measure the development of knowledge and skills that are important, we will continue to relegate the vast majority of our students to low-level learning.
- o Good assessments can't be done on the cheap. There is a national role for the support and development of better assessments. There is no other way that we as a nation can know how well we are doing and where and why we are falling short.
- o Public school choice may have its benefits, but it is not a system of accountability, as the Administration seems to believe. Substituting public school choice for national and state leadership on education reform, assessment and accountability would be a dangerous mistake.

...On School Infrastructure and Technology

- o Many of our schools, especially those in inner cities, look more like crumbling, dangerous warehouses than places of learning. Government support for capital improvement is much needed.
- o According to the Office of Technology Assessment, education has the lowest level of capital investment per worker of any industry--about \$1,000 per employee--compared to an average of \$50,000 per worker for the economy as a whole, and \$300,000 per worker in some high-tech industries. Technology and productivity go hand-in-hand. Yet our schools' main technology is still "chalk-and-talk." Technology goes beyond computers in the schools (which many of our inner city schools don't have anyway). There is a national role, perhaps through public/private ventures, in helping bring our schools into the 21st century.

...On School Bureaucracy and Regulation

- o In the 1960s, Martin Mayer documented in The Schools that New York City had more education administrators than the whole of France, and New York State more than all of Western Europe. There is every sign that this situation has become worse. Most recently, this top-heavy bureaucracy was highlighted in a Peat Marwick report on the D.C. schools. Less than half of American education dollars are spent on

services for students in the classrooms. What is happening to the rest? It's time for the states and local districts to take an accounting of where our education dollars go. American industry has dramatically pared down its administrative overhead and flattened its hierarchical structures. In a time of competition for scarce resources, and when all the research demonstrates that those who work closest with kids know what works best, it's time to rethink our school bureaucracy and financial allocations.

- o Schools are being over-regulated into paralysis and mediocrity. Despite the frequently good intentions of many of these regulations, many of them have negative effects. We should review all local, state and federal regulations concerning education for their effects on kids and on the learning process. But we must be careful. Such a review, and possible deregulation, should not undermine hard-won civil rights gains; they should advance them. Nor should this lead to a situation where resources and services intended for needy children do not reach their target.

...On the Professionalization of Teaching and School Management

- o Because teachers are closest to the classroom, and know the needs of the school and its students best, they should be given the authority to make decisions affecting their school. School-site decision-making and school-based management must be supported and developed.
- o Teachers should be provided greater opportunities for professional development. This should include participating in training programs, conferences, seminars and other activities related to the needs of their students and schools.
- o Teachers should be appropriately compensated for their expertise.
- o Because this nation is facing a teacher shortage, education should be organized more like other professional undertakings. The teaching staff should be able to rely on technology, classroom aides, field volunteers and students helping students to get the job done.

...On the Role of the Federal Government

- o It must be recognized that schools cannot solve all problems. Unless the basic needs of children are satisfied--food, health, and nurturing--even the best of schools are helpless. Other sectors must share responsibility, in areas such as prenatal care, health care, drug abuse prevention and treatment, social services, etc.

- o The federal government should increase funds and support for programs such as Head Start, Chapter 1 and Early Childhood Education.
- o The federal government should increase its commitment to research and evaluation, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Education has by far the lowest level of investment in research--only 0.025% of its revenues--one hundred times less than the average for the economy as a whole, and 80 times less than the average business firm. In an enterprise the size and importance of education, it is ludicrous to spend so little on new knowledge and on finding out the bang we are getting for our bucks.
- o The federal government should provide research support for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This board, made up of teachers, business leaders, and public figures, is our most promising hope for improving teaching standards and attracting and retaining high-quality professionals. Research funds are needed to develop professional standards and assessments.

...On Incentives--Altering President Bush's Merit Schools Program

- o This nation will not see the breadth and depth of education reform that we need unless we have major incentives for rethinking and reworking how we conduct schooling.
- o We should invest for five years the \$500 million proposed by President Bush for merit schools and invite every public school to participate in a five-year, national competition. The winners would be the ten percent of schools that achieved the greatest improvement relative to where they began. The whole school community (from bus drivers to master teachers) would share the reward--an estimated \$15,000 per staff member and possibly higher.
- o School boards would be required to give each participating school total control over its budget and the right to waive all regulations except those regarding civil rights, health and safety. Unions would have to grant participating school staff members the right to waive contract provisions.
- o As for the students, employers should offer better job opportunities and higher starting salaries to students who worked hard in school. Employers need to stop complaining about poor quality and give students a reason to achieve. As things now stand, employers only ask if a student has graduated. Important questions such as how well the student did or what courses were taken are rarely asked. A good grade in a soft elective has the moral equivalence of a poorer grade in a rigorous subject. This is something that can be done right away at little cost and with a positive effect. Students need to know that school counts.

- o Similarly, colleges should offer admission only to students prepared to do college-level work. Any student qualified to enter college should be allowed to do so. Money should not be an obstacle. But achievement needs to count.