

## **SCHOOL SAFETY CONFERENCE**

### **ADDRESS BY AFT PRESIDENT ALBERT SHANKER**

**FEBRUARY 3, 1995**

I can't think of a more important topic. Over the last few months and over the next few months, there have been and will be a number of conferences on this issue. I can assure you, all of the other conferences resemble each other, and this one will be very different. It will have a very different point of view.

We have had, over the last decade or more, a national debate on the issue of school quality. And there is a national consensus that we need to do a lot better. We are probably doing better than we used to, but we're not doing as well as other industrial countries. And in order to do well, we are going to have to do some of the things that those other countries are doing, such as develop high standards, assessments related to those standards, and a system of consequences so that teachers and youngsters and parents know that school counts. School makes a difference, whether it's getting a job or getting into a college or getting into a training program.

We're well on the way. It's going to take time, but we're on the way to bringing about the improvement that we need. But you can have a wonderful curriculum and terrific assessments and you can state that there are consequences out there, but none of this is going to do much good in terms of providing youngsters with an education if we don't meet certain basic, obvious conditions. And those conditions are simply that you have to have schools that are safe and classrooms where there is sufficient order so that the curriculum means something. Without that, all of this stuff is nonsense. You can deliver a terrific curriculum, but if youngsters are throwing things, cursing and yelling and punching each other, then the curriculum doesn't mean anything in that classroom. The agenda is quite different.

And so we have a very interesting phenomenon. We have members of Congress and governors and state legislators talking about choice and vouchers and charter schools, and you know what the big incentive for those issues is. Parents are not really pushing for these things, except in conditions where their children seem to be unsafe or in conditions where they can't learn. And then they say, well, look, if you can't straighten things out here, then give me a chance to take my youngster somewhere else. And so we're about to put in place a ridiculous situation. We're going to create a system of choice and vouchers, so that 98 percent of the kids who behave can go someplace and be safe. And we're going to leave the 2 percent who are violent and disruptive to take over the schools. Now, isn't it ridiculous to move 98 percent of the kids, when all you have to do is move 2 or 3 percent of them and the other 98 percent would be absolutely fine?

Now this is a problem which has a number of aspects and I want to talk about them. First, there is, of course, the problem of extreme danger, where we are dealing with violence or guns or drugs within the school. And, as we look to the schools, what we find is that the schools seem to be unable to handle this. We had headlines here in DC just a week ago saying that the mayor and school officials say they don't know what else to do. In other words, they've done everything that they can, and the guns, and the knives, and the drugs are still there. So, it just happens that they have actually said it, but that is, in fact, how many school administrators and school boards across the country behave. They treat violence as a fact of life, that's what society is like, and they just go through a couple of ritual efforts to try to show that they're doing something. But, basically, they give up.

What we have is what amounts to a very high level of tolerance of this type of activity. Now, of course, the violence and the guns and the drugs have to be distinguished from another type of activity. This other type isn't deadly in the sense that you are going to read tomorrow morning that some youngster was stabbed or shot. And that's the whole question of just plain out-and-out disruption: the youngster who is constantly yelling, cursing, jumping, fighting, doing all sorts of things, so that most of the time of the other students in the class and the teacher is devoted not to the academic mission of the schools but to figuring out how to contain this individual. And in this area, we have an even higher tolerance than we do in the area of violence, where occasionally youngsters are suspended or removed for periods of time.

The reason that we have these high levels of violence and disruption has to do with lessons that the youngsters learn -- and we teach them those lessons, we collectively who are in the school system -- at a very early age. They see some youngster in kindergarten behaving in an atrocious way, and they are all sure that something is going to happen to that youngster. They're looking, and they're waiting for someone to come from heaven or from the principal's office, from somewhere, because they have some sense of justice. They have some sense that when you do something wrong, somebody comes to get you or to do something about it. But what happens? Nothing happens.

And when nothing happens, this little kid who is five or six years old turns to his or her peers and says, "Now look at that, you yellow so and so. You see what I did? You didn't have the guts to do that, did you? You were afraid that something was going to happen to me, right? Well, what happened to me? Nothing." What happens very soon is that the teacher is no longer the leader in the classroom, that youngster is. Because that youngster is now the proud leader in that peer group. The peer group is not afraid that the principal will come. Nobody's going to come. If you didn't do anything when one kid did something, what are you going to do when all of us together are doing the same thing? Now you've got a real problem. Do you kick them all out? No, you can't do that.

And so what we do, at a very early age, is teach these youngsters a very bad lesson and then that moves up all the way through the schools. Now, just think about it. You let one kid into a school with a weapon, and if you tolerate that, pretty soon half of the kids have weapons. Why? Well, the others need them to protect themselves from the first

guy. That's their excuse. If you ask most of the kids, they don't want to be carrying the weapons. But they're carrying the weapons because they want to protect themselves. Of course, once they've got them it doesn't turn out to be only protection. And once you get into a situation where all of the youngsters in a class or in a school are like this, whether it's with arms or with disruption, how do you change that? Then you have to close the place, redistribute the youngsters, because you've got an entire culture that says this is the way things are going to be.

Now, I visited a school yesterday for youngsters with learning disabilities. I spoke to the principal, who had been a Washington, DC school principal and is also a professor in a local university here. In that role, she was visiting another public school in the city and she described the situation in that school. There was a youngster who had a history not only of beating up everybody that he could get hold of, but also of being a fire bug. And the school is in a state of terror. But because this youngster is disturbed and disabled, they can't do anything. There aren't any private schools that want to take this youngster, and yet we are subjecting all of these other youngsters in a public school, who are required to go to school or they'll be violating the law, to a youngster who has this sort of record and puts them at risk.

Last year when Congress was debating the Goals 2000 education program, there were an awful lot of people who said, you know, in addition to having different kinds of standards content standards -- what you should learn -- and performance standards -- how good is good enough -- you ought to have opportunity-to-learn standards. It's not fair to hold kids to these standards unless they've had certain advantages. It's not fair, if one kid has had early childhood education and one hasn't, to hold them to the same standard. It's not fair, if at this school they don't have any textbooks or the textbooks are 15 years old, and in that school they have the most modern books. It's not fair, if in this school they've got computers, and in that school kids have never seen a computer.

Well, I submit to you that if you want to talk about opportunity-to-learn standards, there are a lot of kids who've made it without the most up-to-date textbooks. It's better if you have them. There are a lot of kids who've made it without early childhood education. It's a lot better if you've got it, and we're for that. Throughout history, people have learned without computers, but it's better if you've got them. But nobody has ever learned if they were in a classroom with one or two kids who took up 90 percent of the time through disruption, violence, or threats of violence. You deprive children of an opportunity to learn if you do not first provide an orderly situation within the classroom and within the school. That comes ahead of all of these other things.

Now, I said that this conference was going to be different from every conference that I've been to and every conference that I've read about. I have a report here that was sent to me by John Cole [President of the Texas Federation of Teachers], who went to The Scholastic Annual Summit on Youth Violence on October 17. I'm not going to read the whole thing, but I'll just read enough that you get the flavor of what these other conferences are like: "So start with the concept that the real victims of violence are those

unfortunate individuals who have been led into lives of crime by the failure of society to provide them with hope for a meaningful life. Following that logic, one must conclude that society has not done enough for these children and that we must find ways to salvage their lives. Schools must work patiently with these individuals offering them different avenues out of this situation. As an institution charged with responsibility for education, schools must have programs to identify those who are embarking on a life of crime and violence and lift them out of the snares into which they have fallen. Society, meanwhile, should be more forgiving of the sins of these poor creatures, who through no real fault of their own are the victims of racism and economic injustice.

“Again and again and again, panelists pointed out that the young people we are talking about, to paraphrase Rodney Dangerfield, ‘don’t get no respect.’ The experts assured us that young people take up weapons, commit acts of violence, and abuse drugs because this enables them to obtain respect from their peers. I found myself thinking that we aid and abet this behavior when we bend over backwards to accommodate those young people who have bought into this philosophy. By lavishing attention on them, we may even encourage a spread of that behavior. Many of these programs are well meaning but counterproductive.

“I don’t want to condemn this conference as a waste of time. Obviously we do need programs to work with these young people, and we should try to salvage as many as we can. However, we must somehow come to grips with the idea that individuals have responsibility for their own actions. If we assume that society is to blame for all of the problems these young people have, may we then assume that society must develop solutions that take care of these young people’s problems? We take away from each individual the responsibility for his or her own life. Once the individual assumes that he or she has lost control of his own destiny, that individual has no difficulty in justifying any act because he or she feels no responsibility for the consequences.”

Now with that philosophy, the idea is not that we want to be punitive or nasty, but essentially schools must teach not only English and mathematics and reading and writing and history, but also teach that there are ways of behaving in society that are unacceptable. And when we sit back and tolerate certain types of behavior, we are teaching youngsters that certain types of behavior are acceptable, which eventually will end up with their being in jail or in poverty for the rest of their lives. We are not doing our jobs as teachers. And the system is not doing its job, if we send youngsters the message that this is tolerable behavior within society.

We are also putting at risk the education of millions of youngsters. Now, you know that’s something we wouldn’t do as parents. Suppose we had, let’s say, four or five kids of our own, and suppose that one of these was a very dangerous and emotionally disturbed youngster, a youngster with a lot of violence. I’ll bet that we would do an awful lot to separate that one youngster of ours from the other three or four because we wouldn’t want the others to be harmed. We would try very hard to help this youngster, very hard. But, as parents, our first responsibility would be to say, let’s make sure that

these other kids don't get badly hurt or killed or have something happen to them. That's the first thing we would do. We're not sure whether all of the things that we do for this youngster will work. We're going to try. And we're going to have to do more, in many ways, for this youngster than we do for the other youngsters, who are not so in such trouble. But our first responsibility is to make sure that we don't give that youngster the opportunity to be destructive with the other youngsters.

All we ask of our schools is that they behave in the same way that a caring and intelligent parent would behave with respect to their own children. I doubt very much, if you had a youngster who was a fire bug or a youngster who used weapons, whether you would say, well, I owe it to this youngster to trust him with my other children to show him that I'm not separating him out or treating him differently. Or I'm going to raise his self-esteem by allowing him to do these things. All of these nutty things that we talk about in school, we would not do. So the starting point of this conference, which is different from all of the others, is that I hope that you people join with me in a sense of outrage that we have a system that is willing to sacrifice the overwhelming majority of children for a handful. And not do any good for that handful either. And we need to start with that outrage, because without that we're not going to change this system.

That outrage is there among parents. That outrage was partly expressed in the recent election as people's anger at the way government was working. Why can't government do things in some sort of common sense way? And this is one of the issues that's out there. Now, what are some of the things that enter into this? Well, part of it is that some people think of schools as sort of custodial institutions. Where are we going to put the kids? Put them here. Or they think the school's job is mostly socialization. Eventually troubled kids will grow up or grow out of this, and they're better off with other youngsters than they are separated. Of course, people who take that point of view are totally ignoring the fact that the central role of schools, the one that we will be held accountable for, is student academic achievement. We know the test scores are bad. And we know that our students are not learning as much as youngsters in other countries. So we can't just say we know we are way behind, but, boy, are we good custodians. Look at how socialized these youngsters are.

People are paying for education and they want youngsters who are going to be able to be employed and get decent jobs. We want youngsters who are going to be as well off or in better shape than we are, just as most of us are with respect to our parents and grandparents. And the academic function is the one that's neglected. The academic function is the one that's destroyed in this notion that our job is mainly custodial.

So our central position is that we have to be tough on these issues, and we have to be tough because basically we are defending the right of children to an education. And those who insist on allowing violence and disruptive behavior in the school are destroying the right to an education for the overwhelming majority of youngsters within our schools.

Two years ago or three years ago, I was in Texas at a convention of the Texas Federation of Teachers. I didn't know this was going to happen, but either just before I

got there or while I was there, there was a press conference on a position the convention adopted, and they used the phrase "zero tolerance." They said that with respect to certain types of dangerous activities in schools, there would be zero tolerance. These things are not acceptable and there are going to be consequences. There might be suspension, there might be expulsion, or there might be something else, but, nevertheless, consequences will be clear. Well, that got picked up by radio, television, legislators. I was listening to a governor the other night at the National Governors' Association, who stood up and came out for zero tolerance. It is a phrase which has caught on and is sweeping the country.

I hope it is one that all of you will bring back to your communities and your states, that there are certain types of activities that we will not tolerate. We will not teach youngsters bad lessons, and we're going to start very early. When a youngster does something that is really terribly wrong, and all of the other youngsters are sure that something is going to happen to him because he did something wrong, we had better make sure that we fulfill the expectations of all those other youngsters that something's going to happen. And they're all going to say "Thank God, I didn't do a terrible thing like that or I would be out there, and something would be happening to me." That is the beginning of a sense of doing something right, as against doing wrong.

And we have to deal with this notion that society is responsible, social conditions are responsible. The AFT does not take second place to anybody in fighting for decent conditions for adults and for youngsters and for minorities and for groups that have been oppressed. We're not in a state of denial; we're not saying that things have been wonderful. But when your kids come home and say "I'm doing these terrible things because of these conditions," if you're a good parent, you'll say, "That's no excuse." You are going to do things right, because you don't want your youngster to end up as a criminal or in some sort of horrible position.

I mean, this is the Menendez brothers mentality: everybody has a right to murder their parents because they gave them too much money and they resented it. That's the whole excuse. When we treat kids in the first grade that way, we're setting up their own excuses later on for horrible crimes. It's exactly that mentality: something made me do it. The devil made me do it. It's a version of "I'm not going to take responsibility, therefore don't make me suffer the consequences of my action." So it's our absolute position that every child has a right to an education and, if anything gets in the way, we're going to do something about that, and if that anything happens to be a handful of youngsters, they have to be removed from the others.

Now what should schools do? Schools should have codes of conduct. These codes can be developed through collective bargaining or they can be mandated in legislation. I don't think it would be a bad idea to have state legislation that every school system needs to have a code of discipline that is very clear, not a fuzzy sort of thing, something that says these things are not to be done and if this happens, these are the consequences. A very clear connection between behavior and consequences. And it might even say that, if there is a legitimate complaint from a group of parents or a group

of teachers or a group of students that clearly shows the school district doesn't have such a code or isn't enforcing it, there would be some sort of financial penalty against the district for failing to provide a decent education by allowing this type of violence and disruption to continue.

Taxpayers are sending money into the district so that the kids can have an education, and if that district then destroys the education by allowing one or two youngsters to wipe out all of the effects that money is supposed to produce, what the hell is the point of sending the money? If you allow these youngsters to so disrupt that education, you might as well save the money. So there's a reason for states to do this. And, by the way, I think that you'll find a receptive audience, because the notion of individuals taking responsibility for their actions is one of the things fueling the political anger in this country -- that we have a lot of laws which help people to become irresponsible or encourage them not to take responsibility for their own actions.

Now, enforcement is very important. For every crime, so to speak, there ought to be a punishment. I don't like very much judgment to be used, because once you allow judgment to be used, punishments will be more severe for some kids than for others and you will get unfairness. You will get prejudice. The way to make sure that this is done fairly and is not done in a prejudiced way is to say, look, we don't care if you're white or Hispanic or African-American or whether you're a recent immigrant or this or that, for this infraction, this is what happens. We don't have a different sanction depending upon whether we like you a little more or a little less. That's how fairness would be ensured, and I think it's very important that we insist on that.

We're talking about students taking responsibility for their own behavior, but I think we, as educators, have to take some responsibility, too. Not all youngsters, not all adults, can sit still and keep quiet for five or six hours. And if you go to Japan or China or other places, when you are finished with math, you go out and play ball for fifteen or twenty minutes, when you're finished with Chinese, you go out and run around for fifteen or twenty minutes and so forth. They know that kids need to get some of that out of their systems. We shouldn't punish youngsters for just being fidgety and moving because they can't stand doing something that they can't do physically. And so for those kids who can sit and listen and take it, fine. But before we declare a kid a major menace because he moves around and disturbs the rest of us, we ought to provide some types of programs where youngsters can move and be more active, so that we don't end up punishing them for a condition that, in a sense, we create. We can't create human beings that can sit still for six hours. We haven't figured out a way of doing that, so we need to say all right, if you can't sit still, here's a way in which you can learn English and history and mathematics in a different way, but you still have to learn. You still don't use foul language, you still don't hit anybody, you don't spit, you don't run all over the place. We don't want to create an artificial situation in which the youngster is blamed for something that is essentially a rigidity that we build into the system.

Now, this is common sense. I'm talking about the way parents would behave with respect to their own children. If my youngster does something wrong, I want my youngster to know it. My youngster is going to pay some price for it, so that he or she doesn't do it again. And I'm not doing this because I hate my youngster or because I get pleasure in punishing, but because I am afraid that if I let this go, there's going to be something else, and something else, and something else, and at some point it's going to be too late. A good school system ought to think the same way, because the schools are in the place of the parent during that period of time.

One of the big problems is school administrators. School administrators are concerned that, if there are a large number of reports of disruptions and violence in their schools, their reputations will suffer. They like to say they have none of those problems in their schools. Now, how do you prove that you have none of these problems in your school? Very simple. Just tell the teachers that if they report it, it's because they are ineffective teachers. If you tell that to one or two teachers, you will certainly have a school that has very little disruption or violence reported. You may have plenty of disruption and violence. So, in many places we have this gag rule. It's not written, but it's very well understood.

As a teacher, I myself faced this. Each time I reported something like this, I was told that if I knew how to motivate the students properly, this wouldn't happen. It's pretty universal. It wasn't just one district or just my principal. It's almost all of them. Therefore, I think that we ought to seek laws that require a full and honest reporting of incidents of violence and extreme disruption. And that would mean that if an administrator goes around telling you to shut up or threatening you so that you're not free to report, I think that there ought to be penalties. Unless we know the extent of this problem, we're never going to deal with it adequately.

Of course, parents know what the extent of it is. What is the number one problem? It's the problem of violence and order in the schools. They know it. The second big problem and obstacle we face is, what's going to happen if you put the kid out on the streets? It reminds me of a big campaign in New York City to get crime off the streets, and pretty soon they were very successful. They had lots of policemen on the streets, and they drove the criminals away. The criminals went into the subways. Then they had a campaign about crime in the subways, and they drove them back up into the streets. So the business community, parents, and others will say, you can't just throw a kid out and put them on the streets. That's no good. But you could place some conditions on it. To return to school, students would have to bring with them a parent or some other grown-up or relative responsible for them. There is a list of ways in which we might handle it. But we can't say that we're going to wait until we build new schools, or build new classrooms, or have new facilities. The first thing you do is separate out the youngster who is a danger to the other youngsters.

Now, let me give an example. And I think it's one that's pretty close. We know that, when we arrest adults who have committed crimes and we jail them, jail will most

likely not help those who are jailed. I don't think it does, and I don't think most people do. However, most of us are pretty glad when someone who has committed a pretty bad crime is jailed. Not because it's going to do that person any good, but because that person won't be around to do the same thing for the next ten or fifteen years. And for the separation of youngsters who are destroying the education of others, the justification is the same. I'm not sure that we can devise programs that will reach those youngsters that will help them. We should try. But our first obligation is to never destroy the education of the twenty or twenty-five or thirty because you have an obligation to one. Especially when there's no evidence that you're doing anything for that one by keeping him there.

Now, another big obstacle is legal problems. These are expensive and time-consuming. If a youngster gets a lawyer and goes to court, the principal or some other figure of authority from the school, usually has to go to court. They might sit a whole day and by the end of the first day, they decide not to hear it. And they come a second day, and maybe it's held over again. It might take three or four days for each youngster. So if you've got a decent-sized school, even if you're dealing with only two or three percent of the youngsters, you could spend your full time in court, instead of being in school. Well, I wouldn't want to do that if I were the principal of the school. And then what does the court do when you're all finished? The court says, well, we don't have any better place to put him, so send him right back. So, that's why a lot of teachers wouldn't report it, because nothing happens anyway. You go through all of this, you spend all of that time and money, and when you're all finished, you're right back where you started. So we need to change what happens with respect to the court, and we have two ideas that we're going to explore that have not been done before.

One of the things we need to do is see whether we can get parents, teachers, and even perhaps high school students to intervene in these cases and say, we want to come before the judge to present evidence about what the consequences are for the other children. When you go to court now, you have the lawyer for the board of education, the lawyer for the youngster, and the youngster. And the youngster, well, he's just a kid and his lawyer says, "This poor child has all of these problems," and the judge is looking down at this poor youngster. You know who is not there? The other 25 youngsters to say, this guy beats me up every day. If I do my homework, I get beat up on the way to school because he doesn't want me to do my homework. So instead of first having this one child standing there saying, "Poor me, let me back in school, they have kicked me out, they have done terrible things to me," you also have some of the victims there saying, "Hey, what about us?" You'll get a much fairer consideration if the judge is able to look at both sides, instead of just hearing the bureaucrat from the board of education. None of these board of education lawyers that I've met talk about the other students. They talk about the right of the board of education under the law to do thus, and so what you have is a humane judge who's thinking of the bureaucrat talking about the rights of the board of education as against the child. I think we need to balance that.

Now, there's a second thing we are going to explore. We are all familiar with the fact that most of our labor contracts have a provision for grievance procedures. And part

of that grievance procedure is arbitration. Now, you can take an arbitration award to court and try to appeal it, but it's very, very difficult to get a court to overthrow an arbitrator's award. Why? Because the court says, look, you had your day, you went to the arbitrator and you presented all your arguments, the other side presented all their arguments. In order for me to look into that arbitration and turn it over, you're going to have to prove to me that something in this arbitration was so terrible that we have to prove that the arbitrator was absolutely partial or that he broke the law. You've got to prove something outrageous. Otherwise, the judge is going to say, "You've had your day in court."

Now, why can't school districts establish a fair, inexpensive, due-process arbitration procedure for youngsters who are violent or disruptive? So that when the youngster goes to court, they can say, "Hey, we've had this procedure. We've had witnesses on both sides, and here was the determination. And, really, you shouldn't get into this stuff unless that you can show that these people are terribly prejudiced or totally incompetent or something else." In other words, we don't have to use the court. We could create a separate school judicial system that had expertise and knowledge about what the impact is on students and teachers and the whole system of these kinds of decisions. Arbitration is a much cheaper, much faster system, especially if you have an expedited arbitration system. There is a system in the American Arbitration Association of expedited arbitration that says how many briefs you're allowed to write and how much time each side can take, and all of that. So we have a legal team and we're going to explore the notion of getting this stuff out of the courts and creating a system that is inexpensive and fair to the youngster and fair to the other youngsters in the school.

Now, let me point out that a lot of the tolerance for bad behavior is about to change, because we are about to have stakes attached to student academic outcomes. In other words, in the near future, we are going to have a situation where if you don't make it up to this point, then you can't be admitted into colleges. Or if you don't make it here, then you will not get certified for a certain type of employment. But in Chapter I schools, this is going to start very soon. There is a provision in the new Chapter One, now called Title I, and very soon, if Title I schools do not show a substantial progress for students, the school's going to be punished. And one of the punishments is reconstitution of the school. The school will be closed down, teachers will go elsewhere, students will go elsewhere, and the school will open up with a new student body, slowly rebuild. That's one of the punishments. There are other punishments as well. So if you've got a bunch of these disruptive youngsters that prevent you from teaching and the other students from learning, it won't be like yesterday, where nobody seems to care, the kids are all going to get promoted anyway and they can all go to college, because there are no standards. There are no stakes.

Now, for the first time, there will be stakes. The teachers will know. The parents will know, hey, this school's going to close. I'm going to have to find a way of getting my kid to some other school because of the lack of learning that comes from this disruption. Teachers are going to say, hey, I'm not going to have my job in this school a couple of

years from now because they're going to shut it down. I don't know what the rules are, what happens to these teachers, whether other schools have to take them or not. But we are entering a period where there will be consequences and parents and teachers are going to be a lot more concerned about achievement.

Now, one of the other issues that has stood in the way of doing something here is a very difficult one to talk about in our society, and that's the issue of race. And whenever the topic of suspension or expulsion comes up, there's always the question of race. Cincinnati is a good example. The union there negotiated a good discipline code as part of a desegregation suit. And the question was raised, "Well, is there a disparate impact, with more minority kids being suspended than others?" And who are the teachers who are suspending them? Do you have more white teachers suspending African-American kids?

Our position on that is very clear. In any given school, you may have more white kids with infractions or you may have more African-American kids, or you may have more Hispanic kids. We don't know. I don't think anybody knows. But we handle that by saying, "Whatever your crime is and whoever you are, you're going to get exactly the same punishment." If we do that, I'm sure that the number who will be punished will end up being very, very small. Because, as a young kid, if you see that there is a consequence, you will change your behavior.

In Ohio, they have a minimum competency test. When they first put it out, a huge number of students of all ethnic groups failed the exam. Now, the exam is not a very tough exam, it's like a 7th or 8th grade exam for graduating high school, but nevertheless, about 55 or 60 percent passed it three years ago and 40 percent failed it. Now you've got up to 85 or 90 percent passing it. It shows that if you say you're going to stick to it, you're not going to graduate unless you learn this stuff, all of a sudden, all of these youngsters sit down and take it seriously. The same thing will happen if you've got a discipline code you enforce. Youngsters, who now know there are no consequences, will behave differently once they know the consequences. There's no question about it. So we're not talking about suspending, expelling, or punishing the huge number of youngsters who are now engaged in this sort of behavior. What we're talking about is doing something that changes behavior substantially, so that what we end up with is a very, very small percentage of youngsters who really have some severe problems that you can't cope with. The overwhelming majority of youngsters, who become part of that peer culture because their leader tells them to do it, won't be doing it, because the leader is the kid who's going to be removed.

Now we have another very big problem, and we're going to try to deal with this in legislation. Under legislation that deals with disabled youngsters, we have two different standards. Namely, if a youngster in this class is not disabled and commits an infraction, you can do whatever is in that discipline code for that youngster. But if the youngster is disabled and is in that same class (for instance, the youngster might have a speech defect), you can't suspend that youngster while all of the proceedings are going on because that's

a change in placement. It might take you a year-and-a-half in court, and meanwhile that youngster who is engaged in some threatening or dangerous behavior has to stay there. This makes no sense. We have a lot of support in the Congress on this, and we think we have a good chance of changing this.

I was just given this clipping today, from the Washington Post [1/29/95] just a couple of days ago. It's a column by Courtland Milloy called "An Education in Self-Help." "When seventeen-year-old Selima Nelson dropped out of the eleventh grade last year, her mother was understandably upset and wanted to know why. Selima explained that she had witnessed a stabbing and that a crew of girls involved in the crime had threatened to kill her if she talked to police.

Unable to find a safe haven for Selima in the DC Public schools, Edna Nelson ending up in enrolling her daughter in the GED program. Instead of receiving a high school diploma, Selima now has a special citation from the DC Board of Education congratulating her on 'overcoming tremendous obstacles for the sake of your education.' [And that's a quote. Mind you, the innocent kid had to leave school while the others stayed.] It's certainly not the way her parents planned it. But given the violent reality of life for some of today's adolescents and the chaos within the District's public school system, Nelson says it beats a death certificate from the city morgue.

"I received six summons for her to come testify in the case, but I just couldn't let her go," Nelson recalled.

At first, Nelson said, she thought Selima was exaggerating the threats, which began after a street fight among some girls in October of 1993. "After all," Nelson said, "the fight was about almost nothing -- a remark one girl had made about another -- and Selima had known most of the girls for most of her life.

"I just couldn't see how girls who used to run in and out of my house, calling me Ma, could turn on her," recalled Nelson, who works as a program manager for academic affairs at the University of the District of Columbia. "Besides, when I had trouble with my girlfriends, we could talk it out."

"I'd say, Ma, you just don't understand," Selima recalled. "It's not like when you were a little girl. Don't you watch the news? They mean business these days."

Nelson said that she eventually realized that "these girls are worse than the boys," when Selima's refusal to testify against the accused perpetrators still didn't result in peace. "The problem wasn't so much with the girl who did the stabbing," Nelson explained. "It was with the girls who were trying to impress the girl who did the stabbing. They were willing to do anything to prove themselves, and by hurting Selima, they thought they could win points with the leader."

DC Police tried to assure Nelson that the stabber would be “put away” if Selima testified. But there was nothing they could do about the others, who were constantly approaching Selima with threats.

One night after a dance, Selima found herself encircled by the crew, who shot menacing stares at her. Feeling helpless and filled with fear, Selima went home and took a bottle of pills from her mother’s medicine cabinet. She almost died of an overdose.

While Selima was in the hospital, Nelson kept trying to get her daughter transferred from the school where the crew hung out. But her efforts were in vain. “I was told by several school principals that my daughter would not be welcome because they felt trouble would follow her and they didn’t want any more of that,” Nelson recalled. Nelson said several meetings to resolve the matter among adults, including teachers and parents of the girls involved, degenerated into the same kind of behavior exhibited by children. There were anger and accusations and, finally, no communication at all.

After being released from the hospital, Selima remained distraught and refused to go outdoors. The saving grace appeared to be daily phone calls from her 82-year-old grandmother, Eleanor Nelson, who had a sixth sense that something was wrong. Selima did not want her grandmother to know the truth, fearing that the bad news would be too much for her to bear.

So, Nelson said, she began threatening to tell the grandmother everything if Selima didn’t summon up the courage to go back to school. It worked, and with help from the DC Board of Education member Sandra Butler-Truesdale, Selima was enrolled in the General Equivalency Diploma program in November.

Meanwhile, charges in the stabbing case were dropped because of Selima’s refusal to testify, according to police. She was the only witness who was not involved in the crime, police said. The victim recovered from her wounds but reportedly has dropped out of school. She and Selima had been friends, but the two girls hardly speak to each other any more.

“I’m sorry about that, but I was just too afraid for my child,” Nelson said. “All I had asked was for the police to protect my daughter, and they would not. I had asked the school system to transfer her to another school, but they wouldn’t take the risk.”

Nelson said it seemed as if everybody was looking out for themselves, so she had no choice but to look out for her own.

Two weeks ago, Selima was admitted to the University of the District of Columbia, having completed her GED requirements. She now goes to class under the watchful eye of her mother and her colleagues.

“This experience nearly killed me in more ways than one,” Selima said. “I pray that it is over and that I’m finally on my way.”

Well, that’s the whole picture. And to return to the theme at the beginning, we have a cry for choice, a cry for vouchers, a cry for charters. It’s not really a cry for these things. People really want their own schools, and they want their kids to go to those schools, and they want those schools to be safe and orderly for their youngsters.

It is insane to set up a system where we move 98 percent of our kids away from the two percent who are dangerous, instead of moving the two percent away from the 98 percent who are OK. We need to have discipline codes, we need to have a new legal system, we need to have one standard for all students. We need to have a system where we don’t have to wait for a year or a year-and-a-half after a student has perpetrated some terrible and atrocious crime before that student is removed for the safety of the other students. How are we going to do this? We are going to do this, first of all, by talking to our colleagues within the schools. Our polls show that the overwhelming majority accepts these views.

The support of African-American parents for the removal of violent youngsters and disruptive students is higher than any other group within our society. Now very often when youngsters are removed it’s because some parents’ group or some committee starts shouting and making noise, and the school system can’t resist that. Now I think that it’s time for us to turn to business groups, it’s time for us to turn to parents’ groups. When youngsters commit such acts, and when they’ve had a fair due-process within the system, we need to have a system of public support, just as we have in the community when someone commits a terrible crime. People say, send that person to jail, don’t send him back to us. We need to have a lot of decent people within our communities, when you have youngsters who are destroying the education of all of the others, who will stand up and say, “Look, we don’t want to punish this kid, but for the sake of our children, you’re going to have to keep that one away, until that one is ready to come back and live in a decent way in society with all of the other youngsters.”

I’m sure that if we take this back to our communities, and if we work on it, the appeal will be obvious. It’s common sense. And we will save our schools and we will do something which will give us the basis for providing a decent education for all of our children.