

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS, AFL/CIO

"Lessons For Life" Press Conference

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. SHANKER: -- today. Today, all across the country, there will be the locals of the American Federation of Teachers, in one case joined by a governor of the state in Florida, in other cases joined by members of the business community, by school board members, by superintendents, by parents groups, by civic groups, to announce their participation in a nationwide campaign. This includes -- we have such announcements and conferences will take place in Cincinnati; in Florida, throughout the state, a number of locations; Cleveland; Indianapolis; Detroit; Kankakee; Wichita; Dallas; Houston; Corpus Christi; Albuquerque; Oklahoma City; to Norfolk, Birmingham, Jackson, Hattiesburg, and in a number of cities in New Orleans. And we have here with us today leaders of teachers unions in the District of Columbia and Fairfax County, who will be available to you for questions in a few minutes.

Now, what is this about? As we open school, I get telephone calls from around the country saying, "Today our superintendent announced that we're going to run the

schools this way this year," some new idea or some new reform. Some of them I like, some of them I don't like, but they're -- some of them may work. But there are two things that are necessary in schools which do work and which, to a large extent, are absent. And without them nothing else will work. The first has to do with standards of conduct and the other has to do with academic standards.

Now, why these two, and why don't they exist in most of our schools? Well, standards of conduct, we get a lot of headlines from time to time when you get the occasional act of violence in the schools, and those, of course, are tragic and they're very important and we don't want to ignore those. But far more often, what is very troublesome and what destroys the possibility of effective education is disruptive behavior by youngsters in classes: shouting, yelling, throwing things, verbal obscenities, scenes which take ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. Johnnie comes home, the mother asks, "What'd you learn today?" "We didn't learn anything. Teacher was busy --" you know what Jack did, and the whole story unfolds of what young -- one youngster did which took up all or most of the time of the class.

Now, is this an important issue? Is this just something that some teachers report because they have problems managing their classes? Well, the Gallup Poll which just came out two weeks ago, the American people list this as problem number one: school discipline. So parents and citizens are concerned. We have taken polls among our members. They show that that's problem number one with our members. So there's a general agreement that this is a major problem.

Now, there is a general failure of the schools to do anything about it. What do you do with students who misbehave? Very few people want to throw these students out to grow up in the streets. We certainly don't. Although there were some in the polls, about 20 percent, who would do that. So the problem is -- one problem is facilities, which cost more, but the problem generally starts very early. There wouldn't be very many parents if the schools behaved in a consistent manner so that students would learn at an early age that there are certain appropriate ways of behaving.

But what often happens is that in a very early grade, perhaps kindergarten, even, or first or second

grade, one youngster does something that's outrageous. The other youngsters sit. They are sure that something is about to happen to that youngster. They are saying to themselves, "Thank God I didn't do something stupid like that." And then what happens? Nothing. And the youngster who misbehaved meets one or two or three of his friends during lunch hour and says, "See, you were chicken. And if you don't join me in doing something like that this afternoon, I'm going to get you after school," and before you know it, you have two, three, four, five, six more youngsters involved and it becomes a regular mode of behavior. Had there been a reaction, a response on the part of the school in the first place, the chances are that there would be very little repetition of this type of behavior.

Now, why does this happen? Well, part of it happens because there's just an attitude that, "These are not very serious things and we have to work with these youngsters to adjust it." Principals have pressure put on them by superintendents if a large number of youngsters -- it doesn't have to be large, but even if a few youngsters are reported, the superintendent wants to know why the

principal can't handle it better, and the principal -- well, I can remember in my own teaching that when I had some problems when I started teaching, discipline problems, instead of getting help, the principal said, "What's the matter with you? Why can't you motivate your students?" So I got the message very quickly that each time I would ask for help when there was a discipline problem, the blame would be shifted to me. And if I kept doing this, there would be a record pile-up saying, "Mr. Shanker is no good as a teacher." And so there was -- you know, I had to figure out how to handle the problems myself.

Now, this is a serious issue because the education of -- often of an entire class of 20 or 25 or 30 youngsters is destroyed because of our unwillingness to take action with a single child who is disruptive. What we're calling for here is codes of conduct -- some schools have them but nobody knows that they're there. Some schools have them but they're so complex that children certainly couldn't understand them; you'd need a lawyer to interpret them. Some schools have them and they're just not enforced or, as I indicated, there is pressure put on the teacher not to do anything. And so this is a major -- this is one piece of

it.

The Public Agenda Foundation, with its "First Things First" report, indicated a very -- what I think is a very intelligent attitude on the part of the general public, and that is the public basically said, "If you can't have orderly schools, nothing else will work. Don't talk to us about curriculum, don't talk to us about new textbooks, don't talk to us about new grouping procedures. Nothing is going to work if you tolerate this sort of behavior in schools, because this is what takes up the time and energy of students and teachers.

Now, the second item has to do with academic standards. Now, even in the short period of time of the school reform movement, we see that it works. We see that there are more students taking academic courses and, surprise, if you take -- if more students take algebra, more students learn algebra. And we also found, through the '70s and '80s that as states put minimum competency standards into place, I think you'll all remember that the prediction was, "If you put these standards into place youngsters are going to look at them and say, 'I can't do that,' and they're going to drop out of school." That was

the prediction, and there were court cases, there were organizations that went into court to throw out the requirement that students pass these minimum competency tests in order to get a high school diploma.

Well, what have the results been in all the states that have instituted these programs. The results have been that the initial failure rate was pretty high. Very shocking, by the way, because these minimum competency exams are only seventh or eighth grade examinations, given in the eleventh or twelfth grade. Nevertheless, the initial failure rates were very high, but all the states that have stayed with these now have pass rates of 96, 97, 98 percent, because the youngsters knew what was required of them, they knew that they would not get a diploma, they wanted a diploma, the teachers helped the youngsters, the youngsters were more willing to accept it because they knew that that was the rule, you couldn't just plead with the teacher or have a soft teacher who was going to change the rules, that was it, it was out there, that's what the state had put into place, and the youngsters who -- many of whom were, in some states, 40 or 50 percent of the youngsters failed the examination on the first try and now you get a

96, 97 percent pass rate.

By the way, this is as true for minority and poor youngsters, youngsters from economically poor families, as well. So that putting standards out there that are clear, that are defined, and attaching consequences to them, not just putting a standard out there and say, "We hope that all children will learn this," but saying, "This counts. If you don't learn, you will not -- if you don't meet the standard, you won't be automatically promoted, you won't automatically graduate, you won't automatically move on from one level to another. We really mean it."

Now, here too we have a way to go. There has been some positive movement here, but what do we see. We see that in New York City one Dr. Cortinez required students to take more rigorous math courses; there are indeed more students passing them, but there are also quite a few failing. And unless there are people out there saying, "Let's stick with it because this is only the first year. If you stay with it, next year more students will realize that you have to work hard and meet those standards, and the following year more will, and the students should receive the help that they need to meet those standards."

But there's always a danger that when you go through the first round and there are a number of failures, everybody says, "See that? That was too tough, too many students will fail, or their self esteem will be hurt in some way, and therefore we have to give up and remove them."

Also we have found that in many states the standards -- they claim to have standards, but they don't have any. What do I mean by that? Well, some states have standards that are so general and fuzzy that they're not standards at all. A standard that says, "Learns to appreciate literature." Or, "Understands history deeply." And there are states with standards -- those are not standards. Those are sort of lofty, noble aspirations and it's all right to have them but, as we view it, a standard constitutes at least some form of direction to teachers and students, that this is something you must demonstrate that you know. And it's specific enough so that the teacher knows what to teach and the youngster has some idea of what he's going to have to -- or she's going to have to demonstrate later on.

Now, there's another way of avoiding standards, and that is to put a committee into a room and say, "What

is it that you think youngsters should learn," and they sit there and say, "I think they should learn this," and another one says, "I think they should learn that," and so, before you know it, you have 1,000 standards. Well, if you have a thousand, you might as well not have any because, as a teacher I can't possibly do all of that, and if I can't do all of that then I pick -- then I know that you have to expect me to pick and choose from among them, and if you're giving me the right to pick and choose from among them, they can't be that important because it means that you don't think that any of them that I don't cover are so important, because you're really permitting me and directing me to do that.

So standards have to be explicit, but they also have to be the group that's sitting there and saying, "These are things children must learn," they need to do the hard job of saying, "What is more important and what's less important? These youngsters only take this subject one period a day. And they're going to be here for a certain number of days during the year. What can they learn during this period of time, which of these things are the most important, and which are less important." And unless those

decisions are made we really do not have -- do not have standards.

Now, what is the nature of this campaign?

Probably most places -- in that sense, in most places in this country, I can't think of any right now that really have standards in each subject that are clear and defined and that are finite. Most states are in the process of doing this through Goals 2000 and the round one has been completed, and there have been some evaluations of them, and they need to be redone and they need to be worked on until -- that's another thing. People sit down and they develop these grand schemes and then they're just too big or unworkable and they say, "Well, we tried that, that's it." Well, that's not it; if it doesn't work the first time, you've got to sit down again and again and again and put it together until it is right.

Now, why this campaign? If you look at both the Gallup Polls and the "First Things First," Public Agenda Foundation, there are some other polls and focus group material available. I think that you see a very, very clear picture on what the public wants and expects and it happens to be the same as what teachers want. They want

orderly schools, and they want schools where high standards are adhered to. When the public is asked whether standards should be raised and whether there should be standards in each subject, the answer is an overwhelming yes. It's, depending on the poll, between 70 and 87 percent, somewhere in there. "Would you favor it not passing youngsters automatically? Only passing them if they meet the standards?" Overwhelming yes. "Do you favor withholding high school diplomas if standards are not met?" Overwhelming -- these were all in the -- up in the 70s and 80s, better than two to one; in some cases practically three to one.

"Would you favor doing this even if it meant that some students might not make it?" Answer yes, but the public says, "We believe that if high standards are there, the students will meet -- rise to the challenge and will meet those." Similarly with respect to removal of students who are disruptive. Overwhelming, and by the way, with the "First Things First," there was a special sampling of African Americans and of Born-Again Christians, just to see if there were different attitudes among different groups, and the notion that there ought to be high standards for

the students and that they ought to meet them and that they ought to behave properly in school, on all the responses -- all responses were just as high and, in many cases, much higher among African Americans than among the general population. That is, more African Americans thought that their students were not being held to high standards and should be held to higher standards. More of them felt that discipline was a problem and that the schools needed to have strong standards in that particular area.

Now, what we sense is we sense a lot of frustration on the part of parents and the general public. And the frustration is in the fact that they have a very clear vision of what they want. These are the things they want. They want schools where disruption is not tolerated, where students are capable of learning, where the standards are clear, and where the students know that they have to meet them and they're helped to meet them. And sometimes they get that but very often what they get are all sorts of other proposals, "Let's have this sort of grouping," "Let's have non-graded classes," "Let's try this experiment," "Let's do that one," and so forth, and -- and what you get is more and more anger, more and more "Why can't they do

what is common-sensical, as I go to a grocery store, parent after parent is talking about children not learning because of the disruption, but whenever I go to a school they give me double-talk, like, "We must educate all the children," or, "We can't do that, we can't move this child because the union contract won't let us," or, "We can't remove this child because the courts won't let us," or -- there's always some excuse and the things that the public and teachers feel are the common-sense basis for having schools that work, they can't seem to get. And so this is going to be a campaign in stages, and this is not a one-month or a two-month campaign; this may be a campaign that takes a number of years. Stage one, which is what we're into now, is embodied in the Bill of Rights that you see, and essentially we're going to ask parents, teachers, business groups, policy-makers and others, to agree in principle that these are the two priority areas, standards of conduct and standards of achievement. To agree in principle. Now, there are some who won't agree. But for everything we've seen from all the polls, we think that the overwhelming majority will agree. Now, why get them to agree? Well, we want to get them to agree because we think that the reason

that school authorities, the reason that some state departments of education, the reason some legislatures, the reason some principals, have not done these things which the public overwhelmingly wants, is that teachers go to the principal one at a time and complain about this. Parents go one at a time, and they get these answers. And yet, there we have 70, 80, 85 percent of the public that strongly believes that these things need to be done. And the reason that these public officials are able to continue moving along in ways that the public is angry about, frustrated with, and so are teachers, is that none of this sentiment or belief has ever been organized before. That is, I can't think of a time when most of the parents in the school went in and said, "Look, this is intolerable behavior. We have a whole bunch of classes where one youngster is behaving in such a way that the education -- our children's education is being destroyed. We want you to do something about it. Where is the discipline code? What is the evidence that it is being enforced?" And so, in further stages we essentially want to look at organized people, district by district, school by school, state by state -- there are some national issues here, too, and

we're working on that right now, and I believe that we're going to succeed. That is, right now under federal rules if a youngster misbehaves and if his misbehavior -- let's say that youngster yells and screams and shouts and punches and pokes, and some doctor says that this is due to some disability that he has. Then it becomes very difficult to change that child's placement without the parents' permission, without a court order. But the effect on all the other children in the same, whether the youngster is or is not disabled in some way, the education of all the other youngsters is being destroyed. Well, the Congress is now reauthorizing legislation and there are a number of groups, the AFT among them, working very hard, and we think we will succeed. We intend to -- whether it's at the school board level, state education department level, state legislature, the Congress of the United States, U.S. Department of Education, wherever it is we intend, in the further stages of the campaign, to say, "What is it that stands in the way of doing this? What needs to be done to get these standards put in place?" And to organize campaigns at whatever level they are necessary, to make this come about.

So that's the nature of this program, and it's --

we feel that without it, by the way, that the frustration that the public faces and the anger will ultimately lead to them saying, "There's no point in trying to improve public schools. You can't do anything. You know, we've gone to the principal and we get double-talk, we go to the school board and nothing happens on this. There's the same disruption, there's the same disorder, the students are promoted automatically, they don't know that they're going to be held to a standard so they -- or they know that they won't be held to a standard so they don't bother working, they come home and turn on the tv set, but if they knew that they weren't going to be promoted, if they knew that they wouldn't graduate, they would work harder." And so we intend to -- we don't want the public to move toward a support for private schools rather than public schools on the basis you can't improve them. And we be -- we are certain that you can improve them because when you've got numbers like 70, 75, 80 or 85 percent of the public -- and here you have the profession that agree on a bunch of common-sense issues, the only thing is it's never been organized before, nobody has said, "Hey, we're going to go in together." If there are school board members in a given

community who believe that discipline shouldn't be enforced, well, let that be an issue in the next election, with parents and teachers and members of the community, business groups and so forth, let that become the central issue instead of a whole bunch of other -- let these major issues, the question of standards, become the issues at every level.

(End of proceedings as recorded.)