

A CONVERSATION WITH

Copy to Sue G.
Shankler

ALBERT SHANKER



"For the first time, people in education are dealing with a public which is made up of their equals. Throughout the history of this country educators were dealing with a public which was largely illiterate. But our education system has been so successful that we have educated everyone to the point that they know we are not superior to them. They feel that they are able to criticize.

"A public that is educated at the same level as educators is not going to accept a school system they feel isn't doing any better than they do. Until we develop the feeling that we have a special technology, we can no longer win public support. The knowledge and skills are out there, we just haven't systemized them."

These comments were made by Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, when he was in Seattle recently for a meeting of the Education Commission of the States. Shanker took time from his busy schedule to discuss some of the things he sees in the future for education.

"There is no question that we are facing a decline in the standard of living in this country," he began. "That means that people are going to be living on less and less each year in terms of real income. When people live on less and less they try

to figure out how to save money and still hold on to what they have. When they start looking for where to cut, education is going to be very vulnerable.

We are also seeing a change in population. Parents constitute a smaller percentage of the population, and more and more people are entering the ranks of the senior citizen. This will create a shift in emphasis by politicians which is likely to mean a declining political power base for education."

Shanker also pointed out that large sums of public funds and resources are going to be used on military things, regardless of whether SALT is ratified or not.

"At the same time, we face a series of attacks on public education which are serious," he warned. "There is the voucher proposal . . . tuition tax credits . . . and equally important in terms of education is the fact that the federal government has embarked on its own attack on education in this country.

"The federal government is considering opening up employment offices in thousands of high schools across the country designed to tell students that the schools aren't doing a very good job and that if they leave they can get in on one of these great federal programs," Shanker explained.

Shanker is president of the 500,000-member American Federation of Teachers. From his perspective as a national education leader he offered his views to the editor on the future of the public schools in this country.

September, 1979

"In many cases they are taking students who could profit from continuing in school and putting them into deadend jobs—cleaning up some hamburger joint or something—and that is a permanent disservice."

Shanker predicted that there will be between nine and fifteen billion dollars put into programs for youth unemployment which would amount to about five thousand dollars per student. He said that tax credits would be given to employers for hiring youngsters through these programs "which amounts to a kind of federal alternative school system for vocational training in education.

"It is not a school system which has any certification requirements and there is no accountability. There is merely a massive federal prejudice that the public schools are not doing the job and a willingness to put billions of dollars into an alternative school system that actually takes students who should remain in school and puts them into programs that lead to low-level jobs rather than encouraging programs to develop skills that will be useful to these students for the rest of their lives.

"Thus I see a series of problems for education: an economic situation that is unfavorable in terms of the availability of resources; a political situation in which we have a declining influence because of the change in demography; and a public image problem which is not merely the property of radical right or radical left groups but is part of the fabric of American policy. I think the only way we are going to survive this is if the education community is able to do something it hasn't been able to do before: bury many of the differences that exist between labor, management, administrator, and policy groups—all the various turf conflicts that have existed throughout the years—and recognize that there is going to be a battle which could permanently destroy public education.

"If the major constituent groups are not able to get together and wage their own major battle against their foes then we are in for a losing situation," Shanker said. "I'm not overly optimistic about bringing these groups together.

"We had a terrible threat in tuition tax credits. It's true, groups lent their names and in theory were against it, but if you look at how much work was done by each group, how much budget and staff time spent, how many people went to Washington (D.C.), and how many calls were made to members of congress you see that they aren't really taking the threat seriously. I think it's a disaster because we have something that threatens the existence of the institution which we are working within and which we believe in and there are very few people in the organizational life of this institution who are taking it seriously."

Shanker predicted very bleak prospects for education if the education groups which have never pulled together in the past are not able to begin to work together within a very short time. "Threats to the public schools such as tuition tax credits and vouchers are not going to be defeated unless there is a united effort on the part of the educational community, both politically, to fight these attacks, and creatively, to bring about improvements which will get the public to feel that the schools are not that bad," he emphasized.

"I think the schools have taken a bum rap during the last fifteen years," he continued. "This nation is no longer the major productive power in the world, what we sell is brain power. We are the 'think tank' of the world, and this has a great deal to do with the success of our education system."

One area in which there has historically been disagreement among education groups is that of collective bargaining. Shanker feels that although collective bar-

gaining involves a good deal of conflict it is a mistake for management groups to continue to fight over the basic issue of whether teachers can bargain or not.

"I think mature management understands that collective bargaining means that they have to sit and negotiate. It doesn't mean they have to give away anything they don't want to or are not able to give.

"A strong, responsible teacher organization which has political power is a base for positive legislation for increased education funding. To devote the energies of teachers constantly to fighting as to whether or not they have the right to sit and talk is kind of silly," he said.

"Most teachers in the world are extremist radicals," Shanker said. "One of the first groups that marched in Teheran to overthrow the Shah was teachers. The first group that helped to overthrow Selassie in Ethiopia was the teachers. This country is very fortunate to have a group of middle class teachers that believe in the system, and all they want is to have the right to have someone sit down and talk to them. Having a broad-based organization of teachers which is fighting about smaller class size, grievance procedure and salary increase is a very healthy thing."

The creation of a separate federal department of education is currently a big issue in Washington, D.C., and Shanker is a very vocal critic. "I think education will be considerably weakened by a cabinet-level position for education," he said. "It will have the effect of isolating educators when the other groups are united marching for their budget. You have to ask yourself 'are you stronger when you are alone or are you stronger when you are with others?'"

"The only argument of groups who favor a separate education department is that it gives education greater prestige. But if you are

going to trade greater prestige for less power, that is a pretty bad trade-off," Shanker said.

Shanker said that the move to full state funding is definitely a trend across the country but that he isn't sure it is a good one. "I think that the great disparities that now exist are certainly unjustified and may be unconstitutional. I also think that if we move to the point where everybody has equality then we are going to be sacrificing something," he explained.

"Millions of people in this country have moved from one place to another because they want something different in their education system. When you start getting full state funding and a state-controlled school system in which the schools are largely all the same, the only place people can move if they want something different for their children is to another state or out of the public system. That could result in driving some of the

people most committed to quality education out of the public school and into the private.

"I think that would be a mistake and ultimately destructive," Shanker warned. "Narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor is a good thing, but getting to the point where there is sameness in quality is bad because it narrows choices."

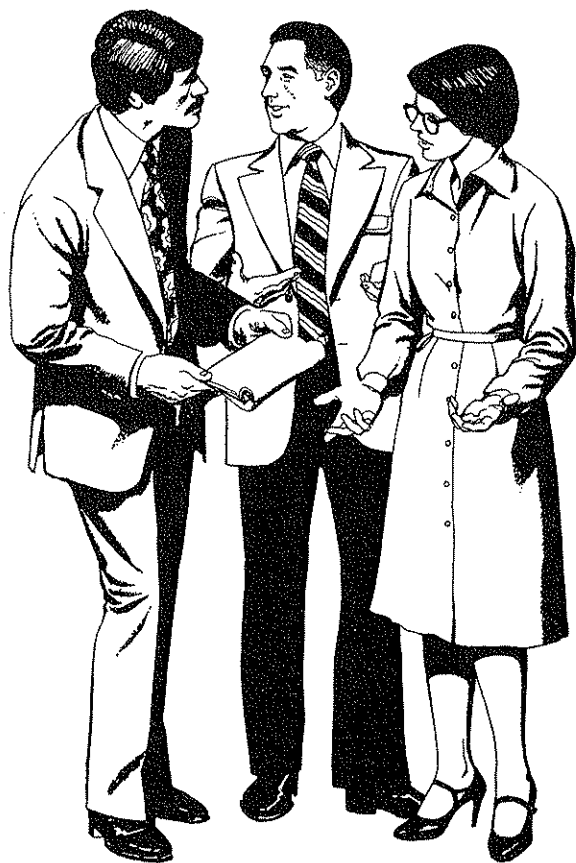
In terms of curriculum in the future, Shanker believes there will be a tightening up of content which includes tougher subjects, requirements for more work, homework, asking parents to read with their children, and greater emphasis on testing. He also predicted that teachers will be restricted on the number of techniques that they can use as some are found to work better than others.

"Education is a bridge between the family and the outside world and, while we don't want to

become purely vocational or technical, part of what we do must link students to what they are going to be doing when they leave school," Shanker said. "There is a valid public reaction against the softness that took place in the '60s in school curriculums."

Shanker agrees that as soon as competency tests for teachers are developed they should be used, but warned against mandating this before such competencies are well-researched. "If you know what competencies teachers should have, you should certify select teachers on that basis," he said, emphasizing that this is an area needing a lot more research.

"The real issue for the future of the education system in this country is whether it is going to be under public and democratic control, or whether it is going to be in the hands of private, for-profit, hucksters," Shanker concluded. "That is the issue."



Looking Ahead at Bargaining

by Myron Lieberman

In December, 1961, the United Federation of Teachers, Local 2 of the American Federation of Teachers, won the right to bargain for New York City's teachers. The UFT gained bargaining rights only after a long and bitter election contest, the first of many that dominated the teacher representation scene in the 1960s. At the time of the election, opinion was

Lieberman is president of Educational Employment Services, a management consulting firm specializing in collective bargaining. He is chief negotiator for 18 school districts in California.

