

POINT OF VIEW

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INCENTIVES AND REFORMS

The Views and Insights of Albert Shanker

Albert Shanker has served as the President of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, since 1974. During his tenure, the membership rolls of the Federation have increased over 50 percent to the current level of 750,000. In addition, from 1964-1986, Mr. Shanker was the President of the New York City local, the United Federation of Teachers. A member of many boards and committees, he has been a constant leader in education at the national level. The following views and insights about incentives for both students and teachers, as well as reforms to improve our schools, are excerpted from a recent interview.

Chris A. Pouler
Publisher

Teacher Unions and Education

Are unions part of today's problem? Sure they are. Are they a disproportionate part? No! Unions, like other organizations, have their own interests that sometimes come into conflict with what ought to be done, but that is not true of teacher unions alone. There is ample evidence that there is no difference in terms of student achievement between unionized and nonunionized schools. For example, private and Catholic schools basically have no teacher unions and, yet, if you look at the National Assessment of Educational Progress results, graduates from both systems reach about the same achievement levels. Another comparison involves states where there is practically no unionization. For instance, in Texas, there is no collective bargaining, no teacher tenure and relatively small AFT and NEA memberships. Now, free from the shackles of teacher unions and tenure, the Texas achievement scores ought to be off the map. But, they are not. Further, in the countries to which we compare our education system, such as Japan, Germany, France and Holland, the teachers are unionized but their students outperform ours. In Germany, particularly, teachers are protected to the point that it is impossible to fire a teacher.

An interesting finding on the National Assessment of Educational Progress regards students in private schools. These youngsters take more academic courses and are less likely to drop out. Their parents tend to be college graduates, to earn more money and to have the interest in education to pay tuition. Yet, the results show that private school students are not doing any better than those in public schools. Why? I think the answer to that is that kids are human beings. Learning is not just listening or passively sitting in the classroom. It takes work and kids today are not working.

What do kids want?

Why aren't they? It is essentially because of what we have done. We have asked: "What do kids want?" The answer is one of two things. Those who want to go to college want to get into one and those who are not going to

college want to get a good job. As far as college is concerned, we have said to youngsters: "As long as you get a high school diploma, there is some college that will take you." So whether they are in Catholic school or private school or public school, the kids stop working when they reach the minimum requirements. That is why results are about the same—very poor on any sort of an international standard. Half the graduates from both private and public schools cannot perform mathematics at the seventh grade level. Since this will not keep them out of college, why should they learn more? One of the most important ways to get kids to work hard to learn is to move toward international standards for college admission. Youngsters will meet them if they know they have to.

The second thing is to look at those kids who don't want to go to college. What they want is a good job. They know that how well they do in school is not important the day they graduate. Employers don't ask for transcripts, for teacher recommendations, about grades, about attendance, or if there were disciplinary problems. As a matter of fact, most large companies don't hire any 18 year olds; they wait until they are 24 or 25. They say: "Why should we hire 18 year olds? They are so unstable." As a result, no matter how good or how bad youngsters are in school, they are both going to get the same lousy jobs.

Job Incentive

Suppose employers wanted to look at transcripts. Think of what would happen if youngsters applying for jobs were told: "Bring your last report card and a recommendation letter from your teacher. We hire on the basis of merit." Does this mean that suddenly students would love Shakespeare and algebra? No, but they would work harder because Shakespeare and algebra would mean earning money. A lot of people would say: "If you raise standards, you will keep many people out of the work force. It may have disparate impact on minorities." But it doesn't have to if we phase it in and provide kids with the help they need. In the long run, I believe, it will help minorities especially, and get all our kids to achieve more.

The challenge teachers face today is how to get the kids to learn subject matter they find unpleasant and to take courses they don't want to take. How can you make everything intrinsically interesting? You can't. Now, great teachers will make many more things intrinsically interesting for a longer period of time to more students. But how many great teachers are there? We need to implement a system of incentives and consequences for teachers as well. For example, if a school functions brilliantly with its teachers producing great results year after year, what happens to those teachers? Nothing, they may even be resented by their colleagues. On the other hand, a nearby school may be failing miserably. What happens to a school that constantly fails and never tries anything new? Again nothing, because there are no consequences. So, it is not surprising that the system does not work.

The Problems of Choice

The proponents of school choice have raised the right question but they have the wrong answer. The question is right because there must be consequences for success and for failure. The supporters have essentially said: "If you have a system of choice, the bad schools will lose customers and, therefore, ineffective teachers and principals will lose jobs and, perhaps, bad schools will close." The reason this is the wrong answer is that there is no evidence that most people choose schools based on excellent education. Minnesota has had choice for a number of years. How do people choose? The answer is mostly for convenience. If I had a school and wanted to attract more students, I would

not have to tell parents that students are going to learn better. I just have to say: "In my school you can deposit your child at 7:30 a.m. since we have somebody to watch youngsters while you go to work and you do not have to pick up your child until 6 p.m. By the way, it is not that parents are wicked or evil; they are concerned for the safety of their children. Let's consider some other examples. If my teenager has a boyfriend or a girlfriend in a certain school and he or she wants to go there to avoid being miserable or unhappy, am I likely to select that school? Sure, I am. Or, suppose my kid is very interested in football and a certain school has a winning football team. Or, suppose I want to send my kid to a school where hard work is not required so it will be easy to get high marks.

What happened in the sixties and seventies when high school students had a wide variety of choices for their high school courses? The theory was that the parents would encourage their children to take the toughest courses so they would be challenged academically. What actually happened? Kids took living and loving instead of algebra and English. They choose the easiest courses. As a result, the beginning of the reform movement in 1983 said no more choices.

Choice also may mean that small groups of people would choose schools that could begin to fragment our society. For example, they may send their children to schools run by Muslims who think it is their moral obligation, to assassinate Salman Rushdie. The issue is real; once you start giving money to religious schools, you can't decide which religion is worthwhile.

Prayers in Schools

I think that school prayer is one of the big nonissues. However, it can create really tough fights. In the past, the prayers were from the King James Version of the Bible. I know Catholics, Jews and atheists were bothered by that. If we found a way of handling school prayer that is not offensive and doesn't create problems, I would not see anything wrong with it. But it is not going to raise our math and English scores, nor has it made them go down. Of course, education is not just about math scores. It is about values. It is important that our schools teach kids right and wrong as well as the importance of religion and the history of our country. George Washington prayed. Martin Luther King was a minister who derived much of his inspiration from religious beliefs. I don't think that schools should hide these instances of religion or values. Is a ritual every day is the best way, I rather doubt it. The way to teach about religion and values is to honestly portray their role in our history.

The President's Plan

The President, in his America 2000 plan, has raised the right questions and given the wrong answers. The need for a new type of school is right on target. The schools of today are like those we had 200 years ago. There are 20 to 35 youngsters sitting and listening to a teacher. There are blackboards, chalk and books. We do not use new technology; we do not use the knowledge that a lot of kids don't learn by sitting and listening. There are other ways of learning. But I wonder about the President's approach, namely, to get corporations to kick in money and develop plans that are external to real schools and then try to inject these programs into a handful of schools. Is this the way a troubled company would restructure? I think this plan is salvageable, but the way it is put together right now is not very smart.

Second is the question of dissemination. The notion of having one school in each Congressional district is neatly political. The Ford Foundation had lighthouse schools in the sixties and during the Nixon Administrations we had

an experimental schools program. Our previous experience has shown that what was done before did not work and has disappeared. So before we repeat the past, we ought to look at why those projects did not work and develop new theories so there is a chance that they will succeed.

The third thing the President wants are incentives, which I think have to be first on the agenda because people who are inside an institution are not going to work hard for change if nothing is at stake. How much is earmarked for incentives--about \$100 million, which is approximately 20 cents per teacher per day. This is absolutely ridiculous! By the way, incentives involve more than money. There is recognition, access to material and so forth. The concept of incentives is complicated and needs experimentation.

The only incentive the President has proposed is the choice issue. He has started a war with everyone in the school system over the issue of private and religious versus public schools. The fact is that when you start a war, you can't say: "I am your friend and I have come to help you. I plan a lot of good and, by the way, I have a knife aimed at your heart." What he has done is to make it impossible for most people in the public schools to concentrate on improvement because we are going to be busy fighting the thing which we think is a life or death issue for the future of public education.

National Testing

Finally, he wants an assessment program through a national system of tests. As a matter of fact, I am the person who first raised it on the President's Advisory Council, and I did not have much support. But once again, he is supporting the right thing and he is doing it the wrong way. He wants to implement quickly an individualized version of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. I am one of the strongest supporters of the current National Assessment of Educational Progress. One of the reasons it is so valuable is that it tests a sample of students so nobody studies for the test since it is unlikely that any one student will be tested. Once the assessment is an individual test, kids are all going to be primed. Further, the assessment is mostly a multiple choice test. On such tests, you don't get kids to think, to respond creatively, or to write essays. Life is not made up of multiple choices. I do not want to wait forever until we have a perfect testing system because we never will. I want to implement a testing system within the next few years that counts for something. If kids can't pass, they should know it will effect whether they can get a job or a diploma or get into college. I am tough on that issue--maybe tougher than the President. But, I am for doing it right rather than blindly and cheaply.

Future Thoughts

I would like to see the development of teaching into a profession. That is starting to happen because of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and because of what mathematics teachers have done in terms of a national curriculum framework. I would like to see each public school cooperatively run by the principal and the teachers with rewards for achievement and with consequences for failure that are based on making progress toward achieving world-class standards in every subject. I would like to see incentives for youngsters. I, also, would like to see a society in which we don't confront such great problems of health and poverty that kids are incapable of learning. This is a very important piece that is missing from the President's program.

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