

Education Minnesota Convention  
Keynote Address by  
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Pleasure to be here. Minnesota has been in the forefront of progressive movements – in the finest American sense of that word – throughout its history.

And now, the educators of this great state have made history again – by leading the way towards the merger of our two great teachers unions.

Proud to be here with my dear counterpart Bob Chase ...

I'm very proud of you officers and staff of Education Minnesota ... and I'll reiterate what my friend and colleague Louise Sundin said when she spoke briefly on the merger at our AFT Executive Council: It took two strong prairie women – Judy and Sandra – to make this happen. (Of course, it took some others as well.)

It also took the commitment and dedication of the extraordinary members of Education Minnesota, who were able to put aside differences and capitalize on so many basic agreements about trade unionism, and the role a merged teacher union could play both in the improvement of the lives of its members – a

worthy cause, in and of itself – and in the lives of the children we serve.

And, look – you merged, and now you have a governor who is supporting public education! He’s making quite a splash, by the way. He came to Washington, DC and spoke to the National Press Club. Let me read you some excerpts of a report on that visit from the *Washington Post* (the “Style” section, front page).

“ ‘Plain talk and honesty’ is what the people want, Ventura declared. ‘You guys in the Beltway don’t have a clue.’

“ ‘I come with no strings attached,’ Ventura said, circling his meaty hands over his gleaming skull to prove it. ‘We don’t want your money.’ The Post reporter goes on:

“Though remote and somewhat cloistered, Minnesota tends to produce sui generis specimens who somehow capture the national mood and define the leading edge: politicians like Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy; musicians like Bob Dylan and Prince; writers like Garrison Keillor and F. Scott Fitzgerald. And now, an ex-pro wrestler with a

community college education who says politicians should actually serve the public?”

So – we all have high hopes for what you all are going to accomplish here. And , my friends and colleagues, success stories are needed.

I know I don't have to tell this group about the threats we face – both to teacher unionism and to the very fabric of public education. As we look at the political landscape across the country, we see that public education is under attack as never before. Powerful forces want to abandon it – especially in our urban and rural areas where it is most desperately needed – and leave it to the mercies of the market economy through privatization and vouchers and now, in too many cases, charter schools that are little more than a way to get out from under standards and accountability and into the payment of public dollars for what are essentially private schools.

And all this is happening, ironically, at a time when public schools are making progress – not fast enough, not good enough – but definitely making progress, as the recent NAEP scores demonstrated, in academic achievement.

And it is also happening at a time when there is more agreement than ever among educators (and the public) about

what works: smaller class sizes, especially in the early grades; research based proven programs; the teaching of reading through a balanced phonics/literacy approach ... high standards and good assessments ... qualified teachers...

And, all this is happening when the economy is in a condition to enable the necessary resources to be invested to make these things real.

Let's look a bit at some of the irony here ... In 1983, a report came out that said that American education was mired in mediocrity and if it didn't improve, our economy would go into the tank. It was called "***A Nation at Risk***"; and we embraced it. We began to fight for higher standards, and for the changes that would need to be made to make them a reality.

That effort has been ongoing, and though it's far from being completely successful, much progress is being made.

As for as the economy going into the tank for example → well, it's the strongest in the world. We've achieved low inflation and low unemployment.

No one is crediting the schools, of course.

Yet the US of A is educating the broadest economic, racial, and ethnic diversity of kids of any country in the world. And as I said, achievement is rising. The 1998 NAEP reading results showed encouraging signs of progress, particularly for eighth

graders, and especially among lower performing students. There were improvements for both male and female students, for white and black students , and for public school students overall.

In general, many fewer students – particularly minority students – are dropping out of school; more students are taking tougher courses and doing better at them, and more students than ever are going on to college.

Of course, we aren't doing well enough to rest on our laurels. Far from it. We still have a lot of work to do - especially educate our poor children, where the achievement gap is still too wide.

Many businesses continue to complain of a lack of basic skills among entry level employees, and there are shortages of skilled knowledge workers – in Silicon Valley and in our schools as well. So, we have problems, yes. And we need to keep tackling them. But our efforts are working, and we have to remind people of that, because too many have given up.

Listen to this: An excerpt from “America, the O.K.”, and article in the ***New Republic*** magazine:

“I don't wish to alarm you, but American life is getting better. Crime has fallen sharply. The economy is booming. Teen pregnancy is declining. The federal budget is in surplus. The air and water are getting

cleaner. Health is improving by almost every measure, including the first-ever decline in cancer incidence. Deaths in accidents are decreasing. Standards of living continue to improve. The use of drugs and cigarettes is waning. Levels of education keep rising. Women and minorities are acquiring an ever-larger slice of the national pie. Personal liberty has never been greater, while American culture becomes more and more diverse. Even home runs are at an all-time high! Yet the steady betterment of American life is practically a taboo subject for intellectual debate.”

This is certainly true for the schools discussion. So: improvement needs to be acknowledged.

We need to fix what’s broken; improve what’s wrong, and not take down the whole public education enterprise!

Now; though let’s talk about what’s wrong.

First, in our wonderful American economy, there are some real problems.

The income gap between haves and have nots is wide and widening. And the gap between top educated people and less educated is the widest.

Childhood poverty is holding steady, and remains the highest in the advanced industrialized world!

And in our schools, those educating poor children have huge problems.

Some of those are very definitely resource problems; in spite of the mantra we hear about money not being the whole answer (and it isn't; it has to be spent well, too).

But the fact is most districts serving large numbers of poor children are doing it on much less than most wealthier districts. In general they have:

- Higher class sizes
- More poorly-paid teachers, and, therefore,
- More uncertified teachers and less ability to attract and keep the best... including substitutes
- Dilapidated, overcrowded buildings
- Fewer arts programs
- Less access to technology
- And, often, shamefully, an actual dearth of books and supplies.

It's also true that, despite resource problems, we have hundreds of successful schools in our poorest districts, and we're producing more and more ...

What do they have in common?

- Orderly, disciplined environments
- Good leadership, management and qualified teachers who work as a team, as colleagues
- Parental involvement
- High standards and expectations
- Challenging curriculum
- Use of proven research-based programs

There is much agreement on what works.

More and more states and districts are putting high standards into place, ending social promotion, and requiring intervention to help students before they fall too far behind.

There are programs to redesign failing schools taking hold in many states and districts ...

Lower class sizes especially in the early grades are being put into place in many states, and the Clinton program will help do that. Better quality early childhood education, more rigorous courses in high school, peer evaluation and review.... From Boston to New York to Chicago to Minneapolis to North Carolina,



Texas and California, schools are improving; student scores are rising, children are doing better.

One main challenge in all of this, of course, is to get the support that teachers need to get this done ... the time they need... the access to quality professional development ... and extra help for their students, from special tutoring and programs after school, all the way to counseling and family crisis intervention. Because teachers and paras and other educators are working harder and harder, and they need help and support.

But the main challenge is to stay the course. To keep the hard work of improvement going. To defeat the growing drumbeat of privatizers and voucherites and now charter school opportunists ... cynics who talk about “competition” but who are satisfied to “save” a few and get out from under the much more difficult job of taking responsibility for the education of all American’s children.

You don’t find the best health care facilities, the best equipped libraries, even the best supermarkets in poor neighborhoods.

Government has to take responsibility for certain things.

And educating all its nation’s children is one of them.

AFT is doing its part. (As is NEA)

Some of what we're doing:

- Of course, fighting for adequate resources at every level. Nationally, ESEA and Title I help level the playing field throughout the states for the poorest kids.
- Pressing for what works, for standards, for use of proven programs, for treating educators as professionals; for ending emergency credentialing and providing mentoring for new teachers, for stopping out of field assignments... Our neediest children are the most exposed to these...
- Helping districts to redesign low-performing schools without stigmatizing the teachers – AFT's program is running in 8 districts and expanding to 5 more.
- We're supporting charter schools that work, that are public schools that are accountable, and laboratories for innovation
- We're supporting public school choice – while working to make every public school a school of choice so that the gaps are not further intensified

AFT and NEA are working together on Teacher Quality issues, discipline, improving school infrastructure – and more.

Helping our state and local unions support positive change, in a wide variety of ways.

Of course, if we were merged at the national level... both unions could do so much more. Look at what you're doing here: not just creating a pro-public education governor, but a series of successful collective bargaining elections for support staff – six new units just since the merger! And let me take this opportunity to thank you for your help in two AFT campaigns – Public Employees and Graduate Assistants. So, yes; working together is fine, it's good, but it's not the same as truly pooling resources, as debating policy in the same governance bodies, and as implementing things together.

I salute you, Education Minnesota! And I hope other states will follow your example.

Because together, we can win the fight to save and improve public education.

To stop privatizers from creating a system in which public schools are government schools of last resort...

...With all that means for democracy, for civil society, for social compacts and, not least, for the future of our poorest children. I know the children of Minnesota will benefit from your vision.

I believe we all will.

Thank you for what you've done and for what you've yet to do.