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Introduction

It's more of a pleasure than you can know, for me to be here with NYSUT. When I look out at all the dear, familiar faces, especially of my beloved little local, the UFT, I have to tell you, it's great to be home again.

I've been a delegate at almost every convention since 1973, when we founded NYSUT as the strong united voice for public education, higher education, and health care professionals, all across New York State, ... from Long Island to the Canadian border, and from Niagara Falls to the Hudson River.

But this is my first NYSUT convention as president of the AFT.

It's been a bit less than two years since I succeeded our late president, Al Shanker, whom we all know was a visionary leader who devoted his life to advancing education reform and teacher unity. We all miss him very much. I certainly do.

Throughout much of last year, I visited state and local affiliates all across America, learning more about the battles this union is fighting for teachers, for schools, and for the students we serve.

And today I'm proud to be here with the affiliate that points the way for our entire union in its size and strength and sophistication.

I can tell you that your president, Tom Hobart, is an old friend and called-upon adviser, (sometimes giving me valuable advice I don't want to hear) and that all your leaders – Alan Lubin, Toni Cortese, Walter Dunn, and Fred Nauman – are a source of help and support for their counterparts throughout this country. I'm particularly proud of Randi Weingarten, who stepped into one of the toughest jobs in the labor movement and is doing a bang-up job – as the members recently made clear by electing her and her team in smashing numbers.

Whenever anyone asks me, “Can a teachers’ union be a force for excellence in education as well as fair treatment for teachers,” I tell them, “Take a look at our union in New York City and New York State.”

Your membership programs, your professional programs, are the most extensive and far-reaching examples,

nationwide, of the quality work a union can do for its members, and especially its new members.

In countless arenas – from the State Legislature, to the state and local boards of education, to public debate and political campaigns – you are the strongest, smartest and most vigilant voice for preserving and improving public education in New York.

With common sense and a commitment to our kids and our schools, you raise that voice for the reforms that the people demand and our pupils deserve:

You've strongly supported raising standards for student achievement – and for teacher qualifications.

But you've never stopped fighting like hell to get our schools the resources to get the job done. Because it's a

cruel hoax to think that raising the bar with examinations, without providing teachers and students the curriculum and staff development and smaller classes they need to succeed, is going to work!

So I commend you: Support the standards. But don't give up fighting for what the kids need to reach them – and don't stop educating the parents and the public about it.

It is prescient that NYSUT made civility and school safety the theme of this convention, as the horrific news from Colorado dominates our lives. There is nothing more important than a civil environment in every classroom and every school – so that teachers can teach, students can learn, and most of all, so that parents can drop off their kids every morning with the confidence they'll come home safely that afternoon. And that confidence was sorely tested this week with the events in Littleton.

It's becoming more and more clear – what we've always known: schools alone cannot solve the problems of violence in American society.

Hillary Clinton is right when she says it takes a village.

The people who profit by violence in video games and movies and on TV have a lot to answer for. And parents have to devote more time and energy to guiding their children, listening to them, and working at properly socializing them. But, truly, no one can do this alone. We're all responsible for our children.

As the first lady said last night, AFT has led the way on schools safety.

Safe and orderly schools are central to everything we do. Nationally, we continue to be engaged in an effort to mobilize public support for making every school a safe, civil, and stimulating learning environment for every student –

while also trying to get people to understand that that's what 90% of our schools are!

-- Very hard to do when an incident like the one at Columbine High School happens. Isolated as it is, it happened in a place that houses children almost every day of their lives, a place so central to all of us. We just have to do everything we can to make sure all schools are safe, that warning signs are heeded, that children and teachers are protected, and that children get the help they need when the problems begin to show. I know that NYSUT is committed to such an effort; witness the theme of this convention.

The Threat

I watch your trials and tribulations – and successes – with great interest. And I know the battles go on and on. (We've never not been in a fight – right?)

But let me tell you – what is happening here is symptomatic of what’s going on around the country – except that you are succeeding more than most on staving off the worst of it. It was our hope that we’d be in the throes of a national merger by now – but that is not in the immediate future. No question it would have helped...But other states are thinking about it – Minnesota did it...hopefully others...

Throughout the nation, there are powerful forces that want to turn public services for every American into profit centers for a favored few.

They’re going after public health programs, such as Medicare and municipal hospitals.

They’re going after America’s most successful social insurance program, Social Security, which ensures that older people will not be plunged into poverty.

And, most of all, they're going after America's most successful public service of any kind, the public schools, which educate the great majority of our children, offer an avenue for upward mobility, and foster a sense of common purpose among our people.

America has always had free-wheeling and far-reaching debates about the condition and direction of our public schools – how they're doing, how to improve them, and how to answer challenges from the space race to the global economy.

But now, for the first time in our history, there is actually a debate going on about whether there should even be public education in this nation.

Not just the usual criticisms – and criticism can sometimes be helpful – but an all-out assault on the very idea of public education.

Calling it a “monopoly”!!

There are powerful forces that really want to abandon it- especially in our urban and rural areas where it’s most desperately needed – and turn it over to the mercies of the market economy.

That means vouchers, of course, that would pay all or part of the tuition at most private and religious schools. And now, in too many cases, -- in many states -- that also means so-called “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.

Believe me, despite the problems you have here in New York, you've done a very good job in containing what is most destructive – and building on what is positive about the charter school idea.

Of course, even when these attacks don't threaten the very existence of public schools, they do drain them of resources and force the friends of public education to spend more time opposing bad ideas, and less time advancing good ones.

As I travel the country, I can tell you we're fighting everywhere, from coast to coast and border to border.

In 34 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, they've enacted charter school laws, and most are much worse than New York's, with far fewer guarantees that they'll

meet any standards, or any public accountability. And many of them explicitly forbid collective bargaining.

In 32 states, privately funded voucher programs exist – with hundreds of millions of dollars funded by corporate wealth behind them – getting great publicity too, of course. And publicly funded programs are continuing in Cleveland and Milwaukee, despite growing evidence that they don't do any better than public schools, and sometimes do worse. Voucher bills funded by tax dollars are very much alive in Texas, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Florida. The right wing in California is attempting another voucher initiative for the ballot.

In several other states, they've passed laws allowing income tax credits for expenses related to private education, and in Illinois there's a bill to give a \$500 tax credit to every

family with kids in private school – a huge depletion of the state’s education funding.

Sometimes a positive emerges from a negative:

In Chicago, the state “cast out” the public schools, punitively turning them over to the Mayor, who, fortunately, is a decent man and who is working with our local there to radically improve the system; and Chicago is showing how a huge city system can improve when folks pull together. Now it’s also happened in Michigan; the Governor did the same to Detroit – with the jury still out on whether that will be helpful or harmful.

And Philadelphia remains threatened, not just with a state takeover, but with a loss of collective bargaining.

In higher education, part-timization marches forward, and efforts to limit it are going on in Washington, Oregon, Utah, and California. Here in New York, and in the state of

Washington and elsewhere, funding is a major issue. And at a time when it shouldn't be, because money is there...

For PSRPs, we're in a major fight against an effort to eliminate payment for paras in Title II!

In health care, we're fighting for decent staffing ratios and needlestick legislation...

In public service, we're fighting privatization in Alaska, Connecticut, and elsewhere.

Paycheck Deception is rearing its ugly head again in Colorado, Kansas and Oklahoma.

And the state of Massachusetts is trying to severely limit collective bargaining and tenure protection.

This is just a quick and dirty rundown of what's going on at the national level. And let me assure you – we're giving them a hell of a fight.

We're winning in a lot of these places.

The Progress

It is particularly ironic that all this is happening at a time when we should be seizing the opportunity to improve, not abolish, public services and the public schools.

Sixteen years ago, the report Hillary Clinton talked about last night called "A Nation at Risk" came out that said that American education was mired in mediocrity. It was at this very NYSUT convention, that Al Shanker urged us to embrace it, and to lead the fight for school improvement. And we did.

The AFT, together with Governors like Bill Clinton and Dick Riley, promoted public school reforms that are taking root and getting results.

And now, we see the public schools are making progress. It's not good enough. It's not fast enough, particularly in our urban areas, where attention is mostly focused. But it's real progress in academic achievement, as the recent NAEP test scores demonstrated.

Here in the USA, where we educate the broadest economic and ethnic diversity of kids in any country in the world, achievement is rising across the board.

The 1998 NAEP reading results show encouraging signs of progress, particularly for eighth graders – and especially among lower-performing schools.

There were improvements for both male and female students, for white and black students, and for public school students overall.

And fewer students – particularly minority students – are dropping out of school. More students are taking more challenging courses and doing better at them. And more students than ever are going on to college.

Achievement is rising because of the hard work of teachers; because more kids are taking school seriously and making more effort, and because more parents are getting involved.

There's a growing consensus among educators and among parents and taxpayers as well that we can improve our public schools with reforms that work:

Smaller class sizes, especially in the early grades.

Research-based, proven programs.

Teaching reading through a balanced approach, with phonics and literacy training.

High standards and good assessments.

And attracting good teachers, and keeping them on the job – which means higher pay and more professional conditions.

We know these things work, and our country has the resources to make them happen. Certainly New York State does.

In 1983, “A Nation at Risk” warned that if we didn’t improve our schools, the economy would go into the tank.

For the past 16 years, we've been doing the slow, steady work of education reform, and the economy is going through the roof.

America is the economic superpower of the world. We've achieved low inflation and low unemployment. And, instead of running in the red, the federal budget is showing a surplus. So are budgets across the states.

Of course, no one is crediting the schools. But our surging economy and our solvent government mean that we DO have the resources to improve all our schools.

And, if the truth be told – our public schools are facing up to – and fixing – what is wrong. And most of them are doing a really good job.

Let's be clear:

We need to fix what's broken. We need to improve. But we don't need to take down the whole American enterprise of public education!

We're told over and over that money is not the answer. But the fact is: The communities that invest the most in their schools get the best results in return. And the school districts with the largest number of poor children are making do on much less.

And that means they are making do with everything that drives down student achievement. Throughout this country and this state – in New York City and other districts large and small with large numbers of poor kids, we see the same disgraceful conditions:

Higher class sizes – for the kids who need attention most.

Lower salaries, and, therefore, more uncertified teachers and less ability to attract and keep the best...

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 these problems, we have hundreds of successful schools in our poorest districts, and we're producing more and more, because of the great work our members do, and because of the fights our union is making.

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.

Here in New York, on every front, you've had to fight against regression masquerading as reform and cold-bloodedness disguised as courage.

You've had to stand up to Mayor Giuliani and his scheme to siphon scarce funding from public schools, so that a few children in low-performing schools can receive vouchers while the rest would be left behind in overcrowded classes in crumbling buildings. How many children could be in smaller early childhood classes if the city tax dollars he proposes to spend on vouchers were used for that purpose instead? How many counselors or other support staff could be hired to help children, as Mrs. Clinton said last night.

Yes. You've had to take on the Governor and his allies in a fight that produced a charter school bill that isn't as bad as it could be or as good as it should be. You'll work with it.

And you're dealing with the cruelest ironies of all: a reneging on promised funding for our public schools at a time the state has the resources to reduce class sizes, to repair buildings, to help teachers do their jobs with quality staff development, and to help kids meet higher standards by providing them with whatever they need to do that.

We supported the reforms that resulted in the requirement that every high school student must pass the Regents exams in order to graduate.

But let's not kid ourselves about what will happen – certainly in the short run. All across New York, there will be many students who will not pass the Regents. In many communities, and in many schools, there will be distressingly large numbers of students who fail, especially those who have trouble meeting the minimum standards presently in place.

And, in too many cases, that will be because they never had a fair chance – not just in life but because they’ve spent their school years in overcrowded classrooms, with outdated textbooks, and obsolete equipment.

So let’s be prepared to offer a context for the Regents results we know are coming. Let’s use the discussions that will follow as an opportunity to keep calling for the state to put adequate resources in place alongside high standards. We have to make sure that raising standards means lifting everybody up, not writing anybody off.

Conclusion

Of course, none of this will happen unless we make it happen.

As I travel this country and call for stronger statewide federations, which we need to fight these battles, I point to

NYSUT as the example of what we can do and how we can do it.

On the national level, we're doing everything we can to strengthen our capacity to serve all our members in every local in every state, from the smallest village to the largest city.

We're organizing more members than ever.

We're expanding our educational issues program to respond to attacks and advance improvements in public education.

And we're revamping our political and legislative departments and creating a field component, so that we can build the strength in all our states.

In California and Colorado, we helped to defeat the “Paycheck Deception” initiatives that would have silenced the voices of educators and other working Americans by restricting the legislative and political efforts of our unions.

And, here in New York, after Al D’Amato decided to be a bad boy and throw spitballs at the teachers, we helped to expel him from the U.S. Senate. We elected a new Senator, Chuck Schumer, who has been with us on our issues from Day One of his public service.

And, whether Hillary Clinton or Nita Lowey or another friend of public education runs next year, we will do the same thing we did last year – send a supporter of our schools to the Senate.

Along with the rest of the labor movement, we will turn this challenging, hopeful moment, into a better tomorrow for our kids.

Because there is no question that without this fighting union, the children of New York State would have lost a lot; and we intend to continue to make sure they – and our members – get what they need.

Thank you all for everything you are doing; and – hey – for being New York!