

## **“Saving Our Public Schools: Steps Toward Reform”**

**Remarks by President Sandra Feldman  
American Federation of Teachers  
Woman’s National Democratic Club  
Washington, D.C.  
April 27, 1999**

**Thank you, Ann, for that great introduction.**

**And thanks to the members of the Education and Children’s Issues Task Force of the Woman’s National Democratic Club, .... and especially Esther Glasser, your task force chair, for inviting me to speak this afternoon.**

**It is a real pleasure to spend the afternoon with such a prominent and committed group of Democratic women.**

**It is my belief that the subject you’ve asked me to address – our public schools – is at the heart and soul of what defines us all, as Democrats and as Americans.**

**For all their problems, our public schools embody and advance the fundamental values of American democracy.**

**They educate the great majority of our children. They offer an avenue for upward mobility. And they encourage a sense of common purpose among our people.**

**I’ve spent my entire life with kids who owe their opportunities to the public schools. In fact, I’m one myself.**

**I grew up in a poor, troubled family, in a tough neighborhood in Coney Island, New York.**

**If there hadn’t been a good public school a short walk from the city-owned slum where I lived, I wouldn’t be standing here today.**

**Public schools help kids rise above the problems in their lives. But our schools themselves do not exist in a cultural, social, and economic vacuum.**

**Our students bring the burdens of their lives and the ills of our society to school with them every day.**

**And that is true for the children of comfort in our suburbs as well as the children of poverty in our inner cities, as our country learned once again with the horrifying news from Colorado last week.**

**We can't ask our schools to solve these problems all by themselves. But we do ask them to cope with them, five days a week, ten months a year – and more 12 months.**

**For 90 percent of our kids, the public schools are the place that has to take them in and lift them up, the place where they spend the greatest share of their waking hours, and the place where they'll learn the essentials of adult life if they'll learn them at all.**

**America's future is inextricably linked with the future of America's public schools. And any attempt to privatize them, pinch pennies on them, or put an end to them is going to shortchange our kids and shrink our country's future.**

**Today, I want to talk not just about answering the attacks on our public schools, -- unprecedented and unfair attacks – but also how we can make our schools everything they can and must be.**

**By acknowledging their progress and addressing their problems. By taking what works in some schools and doing it in every classroom, every school, and every district. And by seizing this opportunity when Americans as never before are concerned with improving our schools – and, at long last, have the resources to get the job done.**

**Let's start with the vision most parents, teachers, and taxpayers share for our public schools.**

**First, we want quality, universal public education – unfettered access for all children, regardless of station. And it's a sad commentary on these times that we can no longer take even that basic American value for granted, ... that the debate in this country is no longer about how to make our public schools better – a debate that has been ongoing throughout our history, and properly so. But today, we are debating whether our public schools should exist at all.**

**We all want schools where every child is learning up to the highest worldwide standards. Where teachers are the smartest, best-prepared, and most respected people in this country. Where all our students can count on well-maintained schools, world-class textbooks, and state-of-the-art technology. And where students, parents, and educators are actively involved and happily there by choice – because every public school is a school of choice.**

**It won't come as any surprise to you that too many schools fall far short of these goals. But it may surprise you that most schools are coming closer than they have in many years.**

**Sixteen years ago, a report called "A Nation at Risk" said that American education was mired in mediocrity.**

**Many educators objected. But the president of the AFT at that time – my mentor and predecessor Al Shanker – urged us in the UFT 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. They've kept up the good work on the national level, and Democratic Governors like Jim Hunt of North Carolina are keeping the progress going in the states.**

**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 even there it's real progress in academic achievement, as the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress test scores demonstrated.**

**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. Fewer students – particularly minority students – are dropping out of school. More students are taking more challenging courses and doing better at them. More students than ever before 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.**

**And it's important to understand that achievement is rising at a time when our schools are educating the broadest economic and ethnic diversity of kids in any country in the world – and at any moment in our own history.**

**Forty years ago, when half our kids dropped out before they finished high school, we were serving fewer than 50 percent. Children with disabilities simply weren't offered schooling. And only a relatively elite group even took the SAT.**

**So – we've made a lot of progress. And we should acknowledge that.**

**We're the strongest economy in the world. We blamed the schools when we weren't. How about some credit?**

**But, as we acknowledge our progress, we also have to address our problems.**

**It's not good enough to be doing a little bit better for a whole lot more kids than we did yesterday. Though – frankly – it's quite an accomplishment. It's not enough to do a little better than most of the countries in the world – which our 4<sup>th</sup> graders do in reading, math and science.**

**We've got to do the best we can – at every grade level and for each and every one of our students – at a moment in history when a global economy and a rapidly changing society demand more from our young people than ever before, especially in science, cybernetics and citizenship.**

**And we have to do it at a time when the problems kids bring to the classroom are more complex and than ever.**

**For all the good news about the economy, the gaps are growing between the wealthy and the rest of us, and between mainstream society and the persistently poor.**

**The income gap between the most educated and the least educated is the widest. Children are the poorest segment of society. And, despite progress over the last six years, childhood poverty in America is the highest of any advanced society.**

**We're told over and over again 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 numbers 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, in districts 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 that teachers can do when they get support, and the ways in which school districts and teacher unions become agents of positive change and architects of improvement when they work together.**

**Just a few examples: In New Orleans, a very poor and troubled district, the number of students taking the SAT increased 117 % from 1995 – 97.**

**In Pittsburgh, the ACT scores of high school seniors last year exceeded the national average.**

**In NYC, there has been measurable improvement in reading and mathematics...most markedly, in New York's poorest inner city schools. (Which is what makes Mayor Giuliani's effort to impose vouchers there so cynical and politically self-serving.)**

**In Chicago, schools are improving on state criteria at a faster rate than the state as a whole. (Thanks to a mayor who responded very differently, when a Republican Governor and legislature punitively handed him the schools; he worked with the teachers' union and the entire community to make them better.)**

**I can recite similar stories about progress from places like Miami, Boston, Minneapolis, San Francisco...and many, many other urban school districts – all of them dealing with huge problems; and showing how schools can succeed.**

**And all this experience confirms the results of educational research. To put it bluntly, when it comes to improving schools – especially in low-income communities – we know what works.**

**First, we know that well-maintained, well-equipped schools work.**

**Unfortunately, few poor children can take this for granted. I believe the Administration's school infrastructure proposal is so necessary, practical, and innovative that I cannot understand any impediment to passage, except for political partisanship.**

**Second, we know that targeted investments in poor children work.**

**The disparities between what we spend on poor children and advantaged children are well-documented, as are the acute needs of poor children that justify our greater investment. And I am not talking about "throwing money at our problems" – something no one ever says about more advantaged children, by the way. I am talking about investing – wisely – in proven programs.**

We will have an excellent opportunity to do this with the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Title I of that Act has been, and is, the nation's principal means of pursuing equal education opportunity and represents the federal government's largest commitment to the education of poor children. It is the only major investment that helps level the playing field throughout the states, where poor districts are consistently underfunded!

The law's basic framework – implementing high standards in the core academic subjects – is the right one. And the evidence is clear that without Title I, the inequalities in resources that persist – and that result in too many poor kids being shortchanged – would be much worse.

Third, we know that safety and order in our schools work.

Even before the tragedy in Colorado, safety was the most important concern of parents, teachers, and students alike. Though any one incident is one too many, the fact is that our schools, including our urban schools, are the safest, and I might add, often the warmest, environments some of our children have. Despite the horrible acts two young men committed in Littleton, it's important to remember that most of our kids are doing the right thing. And that is why we must pay sustained attention to safety and discipline, for their sake. Children need limits taught, parameters set by adults, clear rules, properly enforced. And to assure a safe, orderly environment, we need alternative settings for disruptive children.

Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs work.

But let me take a moment here to say that the schools – urban or suburban – can't solve the problem of violence by themselves.

Parents and teachers have special responsibility, of course. But so do we all. We have to take a hard look at the constant exposure of so many of our youngsters to violence – in video games, T.V., movies, and the internet. We have studies that show that children become apathetic to violence, they lose their empathy, they become less resilient – and more easily angered and depressed.

Here too – we need to build on what we know and severely limit the access our kids have to violence. And we have to make it impossible for children to get anywhere near guns.

Back to schools, and my fourth point: we are learning that high academic standards work.

It's not just a matter of expecting more of our kids. It's a matter of making those expectations understood, grade by grade; developing rich curricula that embody those standards; and providing an adequate supply of materials to

support them. And high standards also involve good tests that are actually based on what students are supposed to be taught, not just high stakes tests for some vague notion of accountability, as is happening in too many places, and fast and full-fledged help for kids who show signs of falling behind.

Fifth, we know that smaller class sizes work.

And now, with our good economy, we have the opportunity to lower class sizes substantially – especially in the early grades, especially for poor children. The benefits for all children are clear. And the benefits to poor children – academic gains that last throughout their school career, – are extraordinary.

On this issue as on so many, President Clinton’s leadership has been exemplary. Last year, Congress supported the President’s proposal for class size reduction with a one-time \$1.2 billion appropriation that is helping to hire approximately 30,000 teachers.

This program needs to be continued. And, across the country, we’re working to ensure that the federal funds that have been provided – and should be continued – are supplemented by state and local efforts.

Sixth we know that attracting and keeping good teachers works.

Not only will we need more teachers to reduce class size, we will need qualified teachers, too. Without caring, well-prepared teachers who, themselves, meet high standards and who have access to the ongoing professional development they need, there is no future for quality education.

We’re already experiencing serious teacher shortages – especially in places where our children need the best. In the poorest districts, in urban districts, salaries aren’t competitive, conditions are rough, and the profession isn’t treated respectfully.

We don’t see emergency credentials in wealthy suburbs.

Our teaching force is “maturing.” We’re on our way to replacing two million experienced and skilled teachers – most of them women who didn’t have lots of options when they entered teaching.

We need to improve teacher education, keep entry standards for the profession high, stop issuing emergency credentials and misassigning teachers to fields they aren’t trained for.

Now, as we pursue what works, we should make sure that even the best-intentioned reforms don’t go awry. Like charter schools.

In the AFT’s experience with various charter schools efforts across the country, we’ve found them to be a mixed bag. The AFT supports charter schools – where they are laboratories for new ideas, smaller schools, and alternative schools for disruptive and violent children who can get a lot more attention than

they would in a large school. In fact, I personally participated in the development of a hundred and fifty small charter-type schools in New York City.

But, unfortunately, a lot of charter school programs are being used by Republican legislators and governors to create private schools which get public funds -- and which are not being held accountable for meeting the same standards others have to meet. Charter schools are a good idea. done well, they can help lead the way. But even done well, they won't ensure that we educate all of America's children, including poor children. Using proven programs in schools with high standards, smaller class sizes and good teachers, will.

Right now, in this historical moment, we have a rare opportunity to improve education for every child.

Our booming economy and our government surpluses can provide the resources to get the job done. The American people's concern with education provides us with the political will as well. And, from the experience in our classrooms to the findings of our research, we know what works.

Together, we need to keep our eyes on the prize.

To stop being distracted by sideshows like vouchers and concentrate on bringing free, quality public education to all our children.

I know we can improve every school and educate every student because I've seen it happen in my own life. Public education took me from public housing in Brooklyn to being able to stand here and address this distinguished audience.

I believe in our children. I believe unshakably, that if we adults do our job, our kids will meet the challenge. And I believe we can do no less.

Thank you.