

**Remarks by Sandra Feldman, President
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Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. It gives me a chance to thank Don Hirsch—and all of you—for the good work that you and Core Knowledge are doing in schools all across the country.

You are making an enormous difference: helping to improve schools and to return the nation to the ideal of the common school—the conviction that children of all races, religions and socio-economic conditions should be instilled with common knowledge and common values, so that they can learn to live together and thrive in a diverse, democratic society.

In this era—when educational issues have become so polarized and politicized—it's easy to forget just how long-lasting and far-reaching this ideal really is. Thomas Jefferson was the first to argue that all Americans need a general education, so that each of us can make our own decisions about what will “secure or endanger” our freedom. A generation later, Alexis de Tocqueville, whose name is often taken in vain by some who have given up on a role for government in providing education – de Tocqueville reminded us that education was a democracy's first duty. It is the power of ideas, he argued—both good and bad—that govern every sphere of a nation's life.

Common schools have played an enormous role in the history of this country—both by helping to provide a way into the American mainstream for all children, including the poor, and by giving each of us, in all our diversity, a common identity as Americans.

I believe that the true mission of Core Knowledge is to help give strength and structure to this historic, nonpartisan ideal.

This being said, I'm sure there are many in this country—and probably a few in this room—who are somewhat surprised to find me here. Because I am the president of a teachers' union, some right-wing conservatives believe that I represent the root of all evil—the new “evil empire,” in fact, according to a recent publication of the Heritage Foundation.

At the same time, there are some on the left who believe that Core Knowledge – and our support for it – is dangerous; some for its supposed defense of the so-called “Eurocentric” canon; others for its increasing popularity among charter schools.

So, in an effort to set the record straight—and because I knew this was an audience that would appreciate important, if relatively obscure, points of history—I thought I’d tell you a little about the special relationship between Core Knowledge and the AFT.

And it *is* a special relationship—even apart from the fact that I’m a proud member of the Core Knowledge Foundation’s board of directors, as was the late Al Shanker, the AFT’s last president, my predecessor and mentor.

First, as most of you know, Don Hirsch was propelled into the public spotlight in 1987 when *Cultural Literacy*, his first book on education, became a runaway bestseller.

But few remember that the AFT provided the first forum for these ideas. In 1985, two years before the book went to press, the AFT published Don’s article, “Cultural Literacy and the Schools,” in our journal, *American Educator*.

Despite the hoopla around the now notorious list at the back of the book (and the much shorter list near the end of the article), we recognized the liberal, indeed revolutionary, nature of the book’s central thesis — the rather simple idea that to live up to their promise, common schools can and must provide a rich and challenging core curriculum to *all* children, regardless of class, race or ethnicity.

Second, the AFT has long been a key leader in the push for high academic standards and for systemic standards-based reform. As such, we recognize Core Knowledge as an articulation of the reforms we’ve been fighting for. Let me explain.

All across the country, the AFT represents dedicated educators, working tirelessly to help students reach their full academic potential. Often, they get little support and much criticism. Sometimes, they have been in schools or systems that consider high standards a threat. In some extreme cases, teachers have been reprimanded or worse for insisting that every student work hard and aim high – that is, for giving out “too many” failing grades. Instead of recognizing and fixing the underlying problems that result in high rates of student failure, some administrators find it more

convenient to kill the messenger. In this case, teachers have only their unions to protect them.

But more often, teachers throughout the last decade or more, were subjected to a constant and corrosive pressure to dumb down the curriculum. I don't have to tell you what this feels like. According to the AFT's polls, almost half of all teachers say they have been pressured to socially promote unprepared students. About a third say they have been pressured to inflate students' grades.

Thankfully, this is changing. Standards are being raised ... and with some success. It can't happen too soon.

Because without clear, common standards, each teacher is compelled to set his or her *own* standards—and then must be prepared to defend them against any administrator, parent, or student who may regard them as arbitrary or mean or simply “wrong.”

It is just plain common sense that to make effective use of limited instructional time, every teacher needs to know—up front—what their students were taught last year, and at what level. And they need to know exactly what their students are expected to know and be able to do by the end of the current year.

Clearly-defined standards should be imbedded in grade-by-grade curricula, and in the aligned assessments that make it possible to tell—as early as possible in the school year—which students are having trouble and need extra help. And teachers should be provided with quality staff development to help them make this happen.

I am happy to be able to say that we are winning this battle, though the war is far from over. Each year, the AFT surveys every state's academic standards in the core subject areas of English, math, social studies and science, to see if they are clear and specific enough to be useful in the classroom. And we look to see if aligned assessments and intervention systems have been put into place. Every year the picture gets a little brighter. Unfortunately, this type of massive, system-wide change occurs very slowly. But it is happening.

And meanwhile, Core Knowledge has provided a model of what a standards-based school system might look like—with a clear, shared grade-by-grade curriculum. And every year, rather than reinvent the wheel, more and more schools and school districts are deciding to adopt this model. Recent studies suggest it's a reform model that works. Your

work has had a demonstrable, beneficial effect on student achievement. You can be very proud of that.

And third, for a final clarification of the historical record, the AFT is not afraid of charter schools. Actually, we helped to invent them.

In fact, the idea of charter schools and choice within the public schools originated in that bastion of small-town conservatism, my hometown of New York City. In the early 1970s, Community School District No. 4 was in terrible shape. It served about 14,000 students in East Harlem, one of our poorest, toughest neighborhoods. Out of 32 local subdistricts in the city, District 4 was dead last in student achievement. Only 15 percent of students could read at grade level.

Parents and community leaders were understandably frustrated. So were teachers—and so was the union.

So, when a very smart and teacher-friendly superintendent was appointed there – Anthony Alvarado – we supported his efforts to allow teachers to band together to create small “theme” schools. Sometimes there were as many as four schools within one building.

This wasn't easy. First of all, the citywide rules and regulations – including union rules – were all about large, cookie-cutter schools, and the school system wasn't happy. Neither were some of our own members, who feared the changes that might be made to their status in a particular school if it were now to become two smaller schools – or more!

But the union supported the effort. Working collaboratively, with a superintendent who believed in teachers and was sensitive to their concerns, we kept our joint eye on the prize – and District 4 became the first public school district where every school was, truly, a school of choice.

Like magnet schools, most District 4 schools were organized around a particular educational philosophy or theme, such as the performing arts or environmental science. But, unlike magnet schools, these schools weren't reserved for a select group of students. *All* youngsters and their parents would be allowed to choose among programs—and so would teachers.

Each school was expected to strive for the highest achievement levels for their students – and support was provided.

It worked. Student achievement began to climb. Not in a stellar way at all schools. But the improvement was significant. By 1981, the number of students reading at grade level had jumped from 15 percent to 50 percent.

This was terrific. But there were some big problems, and some major impediments to widespread replication.

First, authority has a natural reluctance to relinquish power voluntarily. In the case of education, the tendency to hold power through rulemaking—even to the point of treating teachers like dimwitted children—can be extreme. Throughout our history, teachers have had to fight for the right to be paid a living wage, to have a voice in the educational process, even – in the earliest days – to get married and have children when we wanted. (I’m not ready for a rocking chair yet, but when I started teaching, women had to tell the principal when they got pregnant and had to leave as soon as they began to show, or by the third month, whichever came first.)

Unions began as an attempt to gain a seat at the table, where we could argue for rules that brought fairness – and even authority – where we’d had none.

Now, here we were, proposing teachers should have real voice and influence over every aspect of what happens in school—from curriculum, to scheduling, to staffing and governance. You can imagine how well that went over in the top-down system we were challenging. Sometimes even some of our own members objected, because they were comfortable with things as they were.

And while many bureaucratic rules were still operative, by this time, any semblance of a shared curriculum was gone. And the lack of clear, shared academic standards created a serious problem.

If what we were doing was only a matter of creating specialty schools, then most districts had been doing this for decades. Whether it was especially rigorous, academic high schools, or “comprehensive” vocational schools that emphasized math and science, or schools for the gifted and talented, or various kinds of magnet schools—many school systems could already accommodate divergence from the norm. And if the problem was that the norm wasn’t good enough, why support a piecemeal approach? Why not direct our energies to a more comprehensive type of reform effort?

In 1988, Al Shanker gave a speech at the National Press Club, where he addressed these issues. He discussed the District 4 experiment, and

proposed that more such schools be formed—not in opposition to the public system, but as laboratories for reform.

If implemented well, he argued, these “charter schools” could increase parental choice, free teachers and administrators from bureaucratic red tape, and allow a host of new ideas to take root. Then we could identify, study, and replicate the ideas that were most successful. In other words, what he was proposing was not an alternative to the common school, but a means to strengthen it.

In essence, his idea was that education should become more like the other professions. Set a clear goal—curing a disease, winning a lawsuit, educating students to high standards—then let the professionals have the responsibility and flexibility to figure out how best to meet that goal. If this is combined with the means to hold institutions and practitioners accountable for their performance, then a professional canon of best practices usually develops—as well as system by which controlled experimentation can result in the discovery of ever more effective practices. This would be the role of charter schools.

It’s now 11 years and more than 1,200 charter schools since Al Shanker made his proposal. So how’s it going?

It’s sad to say that, in a few states, anti-union ideologues have taken our idea and are attempting to beat us over the head with it. In these cases, the laws that govern charter schools curtail tenure and collective bargaining rights, while exempting charters from having to hire teachers who are fully qualified, or even to meet statewide standards of any kind.. Talk about perverse. A proposal to provide school staff with more responsibility, flexibility, and professional autonomy, instead allows officials to hire unprepared teachers, pay them a pittance, and deny them any role in classroom decision-making. If they object, they can be fired at will. Back to the future. What claims to be one step forward turns out to be three steps back.

And what about the students?

The lack of standards and accountability in some of these laws has spawned charter schools that are suspect in their mission and in their quality.

But, having said all this, I must also say the jury’s still out. In most states, preliminary data are just coming in. Reports suggest – surprise! – that some schools work quite well, while others fail miserably. To a certain extent, it’s what you expect of the experimental. The real question is whether these schools are being monitored closely enough so that the

failures are caught and corrected quickly—before students get hurt. Some are, some aren't. So you hear us complaining about the ones that aren't.

Another issue is how to build on success, ensuring that the largest number of students get the benefit. When Superintendent Tony Alvarado went on from District 4 to District 2 in New York City, he began to work on creating a standards-based district-wide system. He focused on literacy, and on clear grade-by-grade standards for what children should know and be able to do. Again – the union was a partner, an enabler, in this amazing effort.

What became clear there, was that high quality staff development was fundamental to carrying out the program. In District 2, unlike any other urban district, close to 8% of the budget is devoted to providing teachers the help of master teachers, time for inter-visitations and visits to exemplary programs, time to meet with each other to discuss their work and their students' progress.

Let me digress for a moment to tell a story.

I used to meet regularly with the union leaders in each of those schools, because as you can imagine there were many issues as they rapidly changed.

One afternoon, they were telling me how exhausted the teachers were, working on developing the new rigorous curriculum they needed in order to do this work.

I asked if they'd considered Core Knowledge.

"E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge?" they said. Absolutely not. He's a terrible conservative.

Had they seen the curriculum? No. But they'd read articles about Professor Hirsch.

So, I went to my office and brought them my set of the Core Knowledge grade by grade curricula.

Guess what – they loved it. And many of them started using it – or their version of it.

We already know the student achievement benefits of a standards-based reform model, based on a rigorous core curriculum. But researchers have also documented a less obvious benefit. Whether you work in a regular public school or a charter, as Core Knowledge teachers, you report that your professional life has been greatly enhanced. Just as

the program provides structure and coherence to a course of study for students, it also acts an organizing framework for helping to improve staff development.

I know that Don is thinking more about this – about the content of a staff development program to complement this curriculum. And I fully encourage going that route.

Certainly, the majority of teacher training institutions don't offer the kind of rigorous, liberal arts education that you need to teach an ambitious, knowledge-based curriculum. In fact, many pre-service programs argue that the academic disciplines should never be emphasized—the “teachers teach children, not content” philosophy. (That we can neither teach what we don't know nor teach what we know without knowing how is something many of us discover the hard way.) In most school systems, this is compounded by an approach to professional development that can be compared to a drive-by shooting: it's rare that the right target gets hit, and who knows when they'll be coming back.

The AFT is working to change all that. At the national level, we have been fighting to upgrade teacher preparation programs to include deep knowledge of academic content, as well as effective instructional practices. We have been fighting to raise entry standards for the profession – including gateway exams – and for extended internships for beginning teachers, so that they have the opportunity to be trained and mentored in hands-on situations, the way new doctors are prepared. And we have been fighting for coherent, ongoing professional development that reflects the best, consensus research on what works to raise student performance, is grounded in the academic disciplines, and is aligned with high standards of achievement. We've made progress, but it's slow and it's difficult.

Meanwhile, at the local level, many of you have used Core Knowledge to reach these same goals. To fully implement this program, you and your colleagues have had to work through some very important issues.

You have had to develop collegial working relationships. For example, finding ways to coordinate lessons between and across grade levels. To accomplish this, you have had to figure out how to find time in the day to do it – no mean feat, given an already overcrowded school schedule.

You have found ways to deepen and expand your content knowledge. In some cases, this has meant a lot of individual effort and

research – especially in the early years – followed by the collaborative sharing of resources, materials and lesson plans. [In some places, this has led to innovative support systems – such as the Trinity partnership in San Antonio, Texas – which work to forge direct links between classroom practitioners and the experts who can help with both subject matter and pedagogy. I hope you will establish more such partnerships, and I urge you to consider a broader partnership that also includes the district and local unions.]

The opportunity to learn from each other – and to improve your practice and your schools even further – is what drew most of you here today. But, I'd also ask you to consider the ways that expanded partnerships might make your work easier, as well as helping to improve more schools and reach more students.

You have found and developed exemplary lesson plans, and have shared them in your schools and through the Core Knowledge Web page. How far could they be developed and disseminated if your district's professional development program made them available? Imagine what could happen if teachers across the district were able to benefit from a coherent, content-rich inservice program!

What if you had the time, working with experts in the state and district to help align the curriculum with state standards and state assessments, and the results were made available to everyone in the district? Not mandated, not required – but made available. I know many, many teachers would welcome that help.

Individually and collectively, there's a great deal that we can do to strengthen and sustain the common schools. That's what Don did in 1985, when he decided to step into the middle of the education fray.

As citizens, it means speaking on behalf of an education system, built on accountability and high, clear standards of achievement.

As union members, it means working on behalf of reforms that will help children and preserve the institution, as well as continuing the fight to improve working conditions for teachers and learning conditions for kids – like lower class sizes.

As teachers, it means being really thoughtful about classroom practice, about being willing to share your skills and knowledge, with students and with your fellow practitioners.

This is the roadmap to achieving “the schools we need” – an America where a quality education for all is always the rule, where every child, regardless of circumstance, has a real opportunity to achieve a good life in the American mainstream.

I thank you very much for all your doing to get us there, and I look forward to staying the course with you on that journey.