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CONVENTION 2000 SPEECH

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Sisters and brothers, friends and honored guests from the United States and throughout the world – welcome to the 76th Convention of the American Federation of Teachers.

Let's especially welcome the delegates representing the 99,355 new members who became members of the AFT over the past two years – our most phenomenal growth ever! We are pleased and honored to have you in the AFT family.

I would also like to recognize the delegates from AFT's new, second largest local, Puerto Rico, whose "maestras" and "maestros" voted overwhelmingly for the AFT to represent them when teachers finally won collective bargaining rights last year, after great patience and great struggle. Hola!

And please join me in greeting the first-time delegates from Florida, Minnesota, and Montana, where the AFT and NEA are now united.

Today, I am honored and proud to stand before you and report that, as the AFT enters a new millennium, the state of our union is stronger and better than ever. More than one million members strong!

As you can see from our spectacular growth during the last two years, our renewed culture of organizing is working. Later, when we discuss the Futures report, we will see that organizing, at each and every level of the union, must go even further. The need that working Americans have for voice is greater than ever. And, as more and more professionals are pressured to put the bottom line above quality service, they are crying out for the kind of representation we are so particularly good at.

We are a union that reached the one-million-plus mark the hard way – and many of you in this room still remember how very hard it was – because it was, and is, the right way. We stayed true to that powerful, bold vision AFT’s founders had back then in 1916 – the idea that unionism and professionalism are inextricably linked; that the cause of securing voice, dignity, and a decent standard of living for the people who work in our most basic institutions is also the cause of securing voice, dignity, and a share in the American dream for the people our members have dedicated their lives to serving.

Yes, we promote the legitimate interests of our members, and proudly so. Educators and school staff, health professionals, and public service employees deserve good salaries. Without them, we will not be able to attract good people to our professions, and it is the men, women, and children who depend on the vital services we provide who will be short-changed.

And yes, we defend AFT members’ working conditions and fight to improve them. Our members deserve the best, and so do the people they serve. Because manageable class sizes, reasonable ratios of nurses to patients, and sensible workloads for public employees benefit those we serve.

And from the very beginning, when just being an AFT member meant risking your job, we have always fought for the highest standards of professional practice and institutional quality, even when that requires being critical, loudly and publicly. I intend to do some of that this morning and make some new proposals.

Last but not least, throughout all our great struggles, we have always had courage and heart. And that is why from a

small band of courageous teachers with a noble vision, we are now an equally courageous union of diverse professionals united by the continuing power of that vision: teachers; higher education faculty and staff; paraprofessionals and school-related personnel; state and municipal workers; nurses and health professionals, including the 3,300 self-employed – I repeat: self-employed – professionals of the New York State Psychological Association, an affiliation with the labor movement that is unprecedented.

Brothers and sisters, the AFT has been overcoming challenges for almost a century. So you better believe that, armed with the enduring power of our convictions and the voices of more than one million members, we're up to meeting the challenges that face us today!

My friends, those challenges are indeed profound. They strike at the very fabric of the civic and community institutions our democracy depends on. So, it is indeed fitting to be discussing them in Philadelphia, because not far from here, on July 4, 1776, our nation's founders set forth the revolutionary ideals of American democracy and launched the continuing struggles, which is such a vital part of our mission to extend and achieve those promises for all.

They championed the rights of ordinary people to band together to win a voice in the decisions that shaped their lives. They envisioned a government that is built upon the "consent of the governed." They declared that we are all created equal, and that we are all endowed with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And they said that the purpose of a government by, of, and for the people was to protect and defend those democratic rights.

Now, almost two- and- a- quarter centuries after the signing of that historic Declaration, the institutions that are dedicated to helping Americans secure those rights are the subjects of attack, sale, and takeover from those to whom life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are nothing more than commodities to be bought and sold on the market: our healthcare services. Our public schools. Our colleges and universities. The vital services our state and local governments provide to all Americans.

As the economist, Robert Kuttner, recently observed – and I will paraphrase -- the institutions we work in are more than service agencies; they are essential to the civic and social fabric of our communities and our country. The cost of subjecting them to profiteering is the erosion of civic institutions and, with them, civic spirit and participation.

The other cost, as all of you here know so well, is much more visible. It is the price paid by the men, women, and, especially, the children we serve when standards are eroded and services slashed, when there is accountability only to the profit margin. That price is known as human suffering.

As Kuttner also tells us, because of that, “another hidden cost is the demoralization of people whose lifework is hands-on caring for vulnerable populations.”

How well we know. Because, my dear colleagues, that means us.

The teachers and paras anguished about seeing voucher supporters in Congress deny their students the benefits of the Clinton administration’s class-size-reduction initiative. School bus drivers anxious about student safety when private contractors cut corners on bus maintenance. Nurses agonized about high patient ratios that make proper care impossible. Our

colleagues in higher education – 43% of whom are now part-timers – alarmed about the fate of student access and free and open inquiry as they see institutions of higher learning turn increasingly into businesses. Our public employees heartsick when they read about the scandalous treatment vulnerable people they once served are now getting in the hands of for-profit contractors.

And now, as the corporate world eyes our public schools – or, as they often call it, a \$300 billion dollar industry -- the market mantra is being chanted over the most vulnerable citizens of all, our children.

Just how would this work? Consider this. A well-known, billionaire businessman, who has announced his intention to break up the “monopoly” of public education through vouchers, was recently asked, in an interview, what happens to difficult kids in his scheme. I quote: “No one wants them,” he said. “What becomes of them, it’s like every other market place. Some kids are not going to make it.”

Well, not if we can help it!

For the sake of everything this great democracy stands for, the premise and the promise of free and equal public education for all – and that means all – must be upheld!

So, here in Philadelphia, the city of the Declaration of Independence, I know you join me in renewing our pledge: We will do everything in our power to defend and promote the democratic rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for the children and adults we serve and the members we represent! To defend and improve America’s most vital institutions! To make sure they serve the community and are accountable to the public, not merely the bottom line! To get them adequately

funded and have them be uncommonly excellent, so they can better serve the common good!

Brothers and sisters, as we well know, this means that we have to continue to shoulder some special responsibilities, responsibilities that define the AFT. One of those is political participation, so that the voices of ordinary working Americans are heard. The future of our democracy depends on it.

As we will discuss later, when we take up the Futures report and the upcoming elections, that means redoubling our efforts to engage each and every one of our members in the political process, from the community to the federal level. Our members, like the vast majority of Americans, want to live in a nation that values and educates all its children, a nation that treats the sick and the elderly with dignity and provides all its citizens the basic public services that allow families and communities to thrive.

But it is not enough for us to believe these things; we must also actively support and vote for the candidates who stand for them.

We also know that our obligation to beat back those who tout the market as the be-all, end-all, and cure-all does not just end at the voting booth. Because we have always understood, better than anyone, that just because an institution is public or non-profit, this doesn't automatically mean it's high quality or earning the support of the public and the people it serves.

My friends, we have always believed that, as long as there are schools that fail to educate their students, health-care facilities that imperil their patients, and state and local government services whose quality and efficiency are not worthy

of America's citizens, we in the AFT have an obligation to help turn that around.

So let me turn now to our schools – though the points I want to make are just as appropriate to our other divisions, because they have to do with taking our quality campaigns to deeper and more intense levels.

At our last convention in New Orleans, my first as AFT president, I called on you to take on the difficult job of turning around failing schools. To walk into your schools and ask yourselves: Would I send my own child or grandchild here?

I asked you to find the strength and fortitude to educate management about the need to put in place those reforms that research has demonstrated as effective, rather than the ones that just work in some administrator's or politician's head. And to find the strength and fortitude to persuade our own members to make the heroic efforts needed to carry out those programs.

I promised that, if you answered that call, AFT would help. You did, and so did the AFT.

My dear colleagues, we took on a tough job. That is the AFT way. It is the right way. And in district after district, it has worked!

In Baltimore, math and reading scores have risen for the third year in a row!

In Chicago, scores on national assessments have increased steadily for five years!

In Cleveland, where vouchers have proven, yet again, to be an empty promise, the public schools are on the move. In just

one year, 4th graders' reading scores rose more than 14 percent, math and writing scores more than 13 percent.

Hartford: for years, the lowest performing district in the state; a district where our members had suffered through years of revolving superintendents, warring school boards, the disaster of contracting out, and, finally, a state takeover. And yet, when a new and enlightened superintendent came along, AFT leaders in Hartford put hope over cynicism and mustered up the members' energy for school improvement.

And it worked! Hartford's students have soared out of the bottom of the state's achievement list!

There are many, many more examples – like New York City and Washington, D.C. – but time prevents me from mentioning them all. Let me just say that, here in Philadelphia, two-thirds of the city's schools are on target to achieve their 12-year improvement goals – and 100 percent of them could be if Philadelphia's schoolchildren finally got adequate resources and their teachers some respect!

Schools across America have more than turned the corner. And true to our mission, AFT members, through back-breaking work and with the support of their union leaderships, helped turn them around – despite the obstacles created by those who would destroy our public schools; despite the continuing hostility in many states to high-need school districts; despite the constant turnover of superintendents, and, in some cases, because of a new superintendent; and yes, despite the steady, ugly, demoralizing, false attacks on our unions for standing in the way of reform.

But you and I know, and the record shows, that the AFT led the way. And despite it all, we must have the courage and strength to continue down that path.

So, I call you again to the responsibility of turning around low-performing schools. The locals already pursuing this mission and reaping success must continue to do so, despite the toll of exhaustion and despite the uncertainties faced by some of you who have lost enlightened, district management partners. The AFT will continue to help.

We will also help those locals that have not been able to take this on. We will put our program to redesign low-performing-schools in the hands of any local that needs it, and we will do all we can to help bring reluctant management along.

By the next AFT Convention, I hope we'll be able to say that the record of school turnaround and student achievement gains is even more impressive and widespread than the significant examples I highlighted today. And I hope we'll be able to credit school management and political leaders in all our states and districts, and not just some, for finally giving educators and their students the supports they need to get the job done!

Like fully funding Title I and the professional development component of ESEA, so that every needy school and student can benefit from programs that have proven to turn around low-performing schools -- and because every teacher and paraprofessional wants the training they need to ensure their students' success!

Like high-quality, early childhood education – because the research now shows us that the gap in achievement between advantaged and needy students exists at the start of kindergarten, before formal schooling has begun.

Like class-size reduction – because the research on its pay-off in student achievement is so solid that not following through is like withholding a proven medical treatment – and that's known as malpractice!

Like high-quality – let me emphasize, high-quality – alternative settings for violent and chronically disruptive students! Because these troubled kids need the kind of intense help our regular schools can't give them. Because the vast majority of kids in our schools are doing the right things and they need to be protected from their troubled peers. And because no voucher advocate should be able to prey on parents' desire for school discipline and their children's safety – desires we fervently share – by telling them they need a voucher to get it!

And yes, like paying teachers decent salaries! Because the people who educate our young deserve it. Because the law of supply and demand does not apply to every occupation except teaching. And, as I'll be discussing shortly, because we must have high standards for teachers. All of this means that, the only way we can recruit and retain the 200,000 outstanding teachers we'll need each year over the next decade is to raise teacher salaries!

Now, we in the AFT are hardly unmindful of new ideas about compensating teachers. In fact, we were the first to talk about them, and our local in Douglas County, Colorado, was the first to implement some of them, including a sound model of performance pay. AFT locals were also the first to negotiate additional compensation for teachers who earned advanced certification by passing the demanding, performance-based assessments of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Unfortunately, a lot of good new ideas about teacher compensation have been joined by a lot of bad ideas – including a revival of old forms of merit pay, which never worked in any school district and many businesses in which it was tried.

That is why I have appointed a new AFT taskforce on alternative compensation. Its job is to sort out the good proposals from the bad and the ineffective – and to keep on breaking new ground with proposals of our own. That work has already begun.

But let me be clear. Yes, we are going to continue to look into offering incentives for new knowledge, new skills, new responsibilities, for taking on the toughest assignments, and for outstanding performance. But none of this can be a substitute for raising the floor on teachers' salaries.

Because, as I said, unless the basic salary level for teachers is a professional one, we are simply not going to attract two million people who are not only willing to become teachers, but are also able to meet high standards – and who, because they are financially able to stay in the profession, will keep on reaching even higher standards of teaching skill.

Let me now talk about two more challenges we have to meet.

The first has to do with teacher quality, and the second concerns the teaching of reading.

First: teacher quality. Many of you who caught the media coverage of the AFT task force report on this issue were probably surprised to see the attention paid to our support for

rigorous entry-level tests for teachers. Well, you and I know that this has been our position for decades.

What was different was our proposal that licensing standards be based on national standards, because, to get equal educational opportunity for students across the states, we need to set standards for teachers equally high across the states.

We also put forward a full-fledged program to upgrade the teaching profession in every way: from pre-service that includes a strong liberal-arts education and an academic major, to clinical training with mentor teachers in schools; from teacher evaluation at the entry level, to evaluation for and after tenure, including peer assistance and review, which our Toledo local pioneered.

At this convention, we will have the recommendations of the task force before us in the form of a resolution that we will debate and decide. I urge you to pass it and send this nation the following message: Just as we did in the 20th century, we in the AFT will be in the forefront of making teaching a more effective and genuine profession in the 21st century!

Now, I want to turn to standards for teaching reading. I am proud to say that a report commissioned and published by the AFT, “Reading is Rocket Science,” has helped to put an end to the reading wars. Knowledge about more effectively teaching reading is now available. And because reading is the most basic skill of all, a prerequisite for all further learning and success, there is an absolute obligation to put what is now known about teaching and learning reading in the hands of every educator and school official.

We cannot do it alone. But we have led the way and are following through.

First, we produced a guide for union leaders and school districts about how to strengthen professional development in reading based on this new knowledge, and about how to identify the kids who need help the most.

Then, we won a contract from the U.S. Department of Education to put this guide into practice in three school systems: Cleveland, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. I am confident that our work there will be models for school systems throughout the nation.

But we need the work on improving reading to spread rapidly. I am confident that you want that, too, because many of you have called us already, eager to do so. And I remain optimistic that the management partners you need to take on this job will answer the call, too.

AFT is doing its part and more, and our locals are working very hard.

But, my friends, it shouldn't have to be so hard. The fact is, too many of our political leaders and school officials are not doing their part. Too many of them have reneged on their end of the bargain in the standards movement: That they would support our teachers in undertaking the hard work of teaching to much higher standards – not deny them the tools they need or seek to deprive them of their dignity and rights! That they would support our students, especially our neediest children, in their efforts to reach much higher standards of achievement – not drag their heels on early childhood education or class-size reduction, or other help youngsters need.

They promised we'd get new curriculum aligned with new standards – where is it?

They said tests would be better and used more responsibly. In how many places is that true?

Of course, what worries us about these stumbles, unintended or otherwise, is the effect on teaching and learning. What worries us, too, is that they have provoked a backlash, especially among parents, that is understandable but also threatens everything that's right and working in the standards movement – a movement that parents, the public, and, not least of all, our members still strongly support.

It is time for elected officials and school officials –not just educators and their students – to be held accountable!

So, I'd like to lay out a few proposals for how they can go a big distance toward being accountable.

First, in the area of curriculum: We cannot continue to tolerate teachers' being left to fend for themselves with a list of state standards and without curriculums or any other materials, that are based on those new standards. State standards do not curricula make.

There is absolutely no other profession whose practitioners are denied their most basic tools and expected to invent them and try them out, all on their own, while simultaneously practicing their profession. It would be considered intolerable. It is equally intolerable for our teachers and grossly unfair to the children they serve.

How to get the job done?

While we know that the federal department of education is prohibited from developing curriculum, it is not prevented from doing this: Inviting the states to enter into a national consortium

that solicits proposals to develop, try out, and evaluate new curricula, including high-quality educational software.

I'm not talking about an effort to get one, so-called "best" curriculum, because one size won't fit all students. I'm talking about developing a variety of outstanding and effective curriculums within each subject area, each of which is based on high standards.

This would be federalism in action. The federal government would contribute funds, but so too would the states. Plus, the states would have the added benefit of comparing their standards and following the example of the best. And by working together, they would have more resources, more intelligence, and more checks and balances than if any or each of them were to do it on their own.

Now, maybe there's a better idea for how to do this. But if there is, I challenge our public officials and school officials to come up with it, because our teachers and our students need this work to be done – and done well!

There's another important job this consortium can do: Work together to straighten out the problems in testing.

Obviously, if we had curriculum, then the problem, in too many places, of tests being the curriculum would substantially disappear. No test, no matter how good – and all too many of them are not – can possibly capture the sum of education, let alone be a substitute for real education.

Yet, in too many places, that's what our officials are encouraging because they have lined up the incentives in all the wrong directions.

Let me be clear. I personally, and the AFT historically, support testing; it's a legitimate and necessary tool of diagnosis and evaluation. We also unequivocally support reporting out test results, fully and accurately, to parents and to the taxpayers who fund our public schools. And we support fair accountability for schools, for educators, for students – and for our officials alike.

But it is we and our students who are bearing the full and, sometimes, unfair brunt of accountability.

It is therefore time for our officials to be accountable, too – and we'll be fair by just asking them to act responsibly.

So, let me add something to my proposal that federal and state officials form a consortium to spur curriculum development. Because curriculum and testing are related – I should say, should be related – use the occasion of such a partnership to sort out and fix the problems in testing.

I urge those officials: Listen to the voices of parents and teachers. They are telling you, loud and clear, that they support testing but that there is way too much of it going on, at the risk of getting kids truly educated. They – not to mention the testing experts – are telling you that some tests do not reflect high standards and actually undermine high-standards teaching and learning. Look into this and correct any problems.

They are also asking you whether cut scores on some tests, challenging tests, have been set so high that they go beyond world-class standards into the world of the supernatural. Take these serious questions seriously. Look into them, and correct any problems you find.

I ask these officials to keep an open mind. Be open to other honest questions that have been raised about misuse and abuse of testing, including, in some places, how it has become an instrument to punish students and teachers, rather than a guide for how to do better, an incentive to work harder, and a basis for legitimate accountability.

But, do not back off from high standards, challenging and good tests, and legitimate accountability. Because, along with the problems, they have also done good – including showing us which schools and which kids are struggling, and getting at least some of them help.

Above all, do not succumb to extremes in the testing controversy. Because both those who want us just to stick with the status quo in testing and those who are basically anti-testing will place the standards movement, our public schools, and, most of all, our students – especially our neediest ones – at risk.

The need to address these curriculum and testing issues is urgent. I know that the delegates in this room and the people you represent understand the urgency very well. And I pledge that the AFT will work with parents and others who share our commitments and concerns to get our federal and state governments to act on these urgent needs!

I would like to make one more proposal. It is about how the standards movement can better reach secondary-school students who are struggling. But since I'm on the subject of accountability, I would like to pause to say something about charter schools.

Now, we all remember what charter schools were supposed to be. They were supposed to be like laboratories that tried and tested innovative structures and strategies for educating

students, which, if proven successful, would then be applied to other schools that could benefit. They also were supposed to be models of accountability and for treating teachers professionally. In fact, in the original vision, charter schools were going to be initiated by teachers and parents, and the original ones were.

Well, it was a good idea. And there are some good charter schools, including ones we've fostered and support.

But, in too many instances, that good idea has been anything but good in practice: little or no innovation or evaluation; little welcome of high-need students; a strategy for denying teachers voice and rights; and a travesty of accountability.

It is high time for our public officials to hold charter schools to the same standards of academic achievement and accountability that they are demanding from every public school.

And that is what the AFT Executive Council resolution demands.

Finally, I'd like to raise something that doesn't get much attention and make a proposal for action.

I am worried, as many of you are, about those secondary-school students who were not the beneficiaries of high standards during the earlier years of their schooling. I am specifically talking about students who are dropping out, or at risk of dropping out because they feel they have little or no chance of meeting new, tougher high-school graduation requirements. And I don't have to tell you what being a high-school dropout means in today's economy.

My friends, the plain, painful truth is that most of these youngsters are still not benefiting from higher standards. In fact, they are being victimized.

But let me be equally blunt: They would be just as victimized if standards were lowered for them.

Overcoming this problem requires understanding it. The problem is that the middle- and secondary-school students I'm talking about do not have the reading, math, and other basic skills they need. And you and I know that it is almost impossible to teach, and for students to master, high standards, secondary-level courses when students don't have secondary-level skills.

Their teachers are in a terrible double-bind. On the one hand, if they teach material at a lower level that reaches these young adults and from there try to move them up, they are criticized for not "believing" in their students and for being "resistant" to high standards.

But if, on the other hand, they teach material at a higher level, they are criticized for failing to reach their students, thereby discouraging them and causing them to drop out. Of course, they also get slammed for being "resistant" to reform.

This double-bind has terrible consequences for students. So let me expose some other blunt facts. First, most secondary teachers don't know how to overcome these skills deficits in young adults, and it's for the most legitimate of reasons: they were never trained to do so; they never signed up for it in the first place.

Second, the body of knowledge and practice for raising the basic skills of these youngsters, who are neither children nor adults, has never been pulled together and is still incomplete.

What we know for sure is this: If knowing how to get all young children to learn to read is “rocket science,” which it is, knowing how to bring up the basic skills of these older kids to a point where they can achieve real, high-school level standards is “rocket science plus.”

So, I first propose that the federal government stimulate an all-out effort to get programs that have already made some inroad into this problem up and running in middle and high schools where these kids are concentrated. The Talent Development Model and High Schools That Work are two examples of how to start making a difference now. And let’s keep on evaluating these models and developing and testing new ones.

Second: I propose that we give these youngsters the time they need to catch up by guaranteeing them after-school and summer school programs. And for those kids who may need even more help to meet the necessary standards to graduate, I propose a transitional-year program – either before they enter high school or during high school, at whatever point these kids are found. And I propose that such programs be staffed by teachers especially trained to accelerate the basic skills of young adults.

Third: I propose a federally sponsored effort, through the Department of Education or Labor – or, preferably, through their partnership -- to pull together the knowledge and practices that exist in the adult literacy community and turn them into some programs that can be applied and evaluated in our secondary schools.

Fourth: I also urge that educators in the military be centrally involved in this federal effort. Surprised? Here’s why.

There have been three times, including and since World War II, when the military admitted young adults who failed the required aptitude tests for entry into service. Getting what was termed these “cast off youth” up to the skill levels – including reading and math – necessary for them to perform was a challenge the military took on.

And the results were spectacular – not only during their military service but when these people returned to civilian life. To quote from the evaluation of this experience: “Given an opportunity to prove themselves, and with support along the way, thousands of previously discarded youth...found a way to break the cycle of poverty that caught-up their parents and themselves.”

My friends, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience – and results – in the military, and we need to tap into that. We need to do whatever it takes to rescue these kids.

Sisters and brothers, we have an ambitious agenda. Our causes are just, and our aims are supported by the vast majority of the American people.

But that doesn’t guarantee victory. As I said before, there is a growing disengagement in civic life less participation and less voting. When that happens, the voice of those who would have America stand for nothing more than market principles gets louder, while the desire of ordinary Americans for community, opportunity, and personal and family security gets ignored.

We cannot let that happen.

In the elections this year, the control of every branch of government is at stake, and so is the future of public education, higher education, health care, and public services. We can make the difference in whether that future is bright or not.

In the presidential election, the choice could not be more clear. It's not about Democrats or Republicans. It is about Al Gore's and George W. Bush's two, very different records and two, very different visions for America's future. The choice must be for Al Gore.

Al Gore supports public education; he supports Social Security and Medicare; he supports workers' fundamental right to organize unions. And Al Gore is a big reason why we have such a strong economy – an economy that makes it possible to invest in improving our basic institutions and public services. And he will do that.

The same cannot be said of George W. Bush. For all his affability, his prescriptions for public schools, Social Security, and Medicare come down to this: demonize it, starve it, and privatize it.

Our choice is clear. The outcome is not. That is why it is so important to vote and get out the vote!

Brothers and sisters, here in historic Philadelphia, remember what's at stake: the continuing promise of the idea that we are all created equal; that each one of us is endowed with the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

... including the delegates here assembled... especially the part about pursuing happiness! Let's have a great convention.