

**Civil, Human, Women's Rights Conference
AFT Convention, July 14, 1998
New Orleans, Louisiana
Speech by Sandra Feldman, President
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Welcome. It's great to see this beautiful AFT group!

I know many of you are thinking about the NEA vote on merger – and we'll talk about it in a full session on Friday.

Today, I want to talk about the theme of this conference – something I think many of those NEA delegates should have been thinking more about:

The survival of universal, free, quality, public education – as a right for **all** children in this society – a basic civil right. – vs. what some people are now – disgracefully in my opinion – saying: that vouchers are a civil right!

Now – civil rights and the issues we will be addressing here are issues I've been involved in all my adult life as you have. They are among the things I care about most.

Some of you have asked about the slightly changed format this year, and I want to talk about that for just a few minutes –

about how public education is fundamental to human rights, to women's rights, to civil rights.

You may not have noted it, but the conservative forces pushing for vouchers are very good at coining phrases. I'm talking about the Gingrichites, the Heritage Foundation, and other anti-public school, anti-union, anti-government, anti-Affirmative Action folks.

They came up, after all, with "Right to Work" – meaning quite literally – the right to work without the protection of a union, the right to work for substandard wages in substandard conditions.

They came up with "Paycheck Protection" as a name for Prop 226 in California – which, thank goodness, we and our allies in the rest of the labor movement soundly defeated a few weeks ago...

"Paycheck Protection": meaning we'll get union dues out of your paycheck and stop your union from protecting your pensions, your due process rights, your interests in general.

They came up with “Contract With America” when they meant a contract on America ---

And they came up with “Opportunity Scholarships” when they meant taking a few poor children out of public schools and sending them to private schools. This, of course, was a strategy for diverting attention from their unwillingness to properly fund the public school education of poor children in this country ... their unwillingness, for example, to put 5 billion dollars nationwide into President Clinton’s proposal to repair the infrastructure of America’s aging schools, after they signed off on \$200 billion for transportation.

“Opportunity Scholarships” for a few – and to “heck” with the rest of the children...

But what I found most outrageous of all, and what became the inspiration for major sessions of this conference – was the way they started calling vouchers a “civil right.”

Now the people in this room know what civil rights are all about – from not being allowed into a store or a restaurant and

not having the right to vote all the way to being discriminated against by color or gender when it comes to education, jobs, and promotions.

A civil right involves the opening of doors, equal opportunity, equal application of the law... liberty and justice for all.

And a civil right is the right to equal access to universal common public schooling, with high standards, good teachers, decent classrooms and buildings – equal access for all – not a voucher that gives opportunity to a few and leaves the rest in “government schools” of last resort.

Good, high quality public education – that is what a civil right is in a civil, democratic society. Not a voucher system that exacerbates the differences and inequities that already exist.

We are far from done in the struggle to end discrimination in this nation, and we’re far from done in the fight to bridge the gap between haves and have nots.

We have been making progress, though, and we’ve been grappling with it in a forward-moving way.

But this movement away from the continuing effort to strengthen public schooling would take us backward like nothing else could.

And it particularly saddens me that people who should know better, some of whom you will hear from later in the conference, are jumping on this bandwagon. Because believe me, they are effective and they can do harm.

I want to say a word to the women here: You know, I sit on the executive committee of Education International, our worldwide teachers federation. And we work at helping our sister unions in developing countries as they struggle, not just to organize and negotiate contracts, but to bring education to all their children, because so many are left out.

And one of the efforts that moves me so much, is the effort that has to be made, the hard work it takes, to make education available to girls. Because in so many of these countries, where education is not compulsory and far from universal, girls never make it to school at all.

And in a rather amazing report done by the World Bank, in which they discuss how to economically uplift the people in the Developing World, the Bank recommends that the one most surefire way to uplift the economy of a country – more sure than outside investment and various economic development strategies, which of course also need to be done – the one sure way, according to the World Bank is to educate the girls!

Educated girls will grow into women who are in control of their lives; they will not have as many children and they will care better for them; they will bring knowledge about nutrition and how to avoid disease to their families. They will make sure their children also get educated...

Access – equal access – to education is a civil right, a woman's right, -- a gay right -- a human right, -- and that is what this conference and the AFT are about.

As a local leader for 12 years, in a city which is as diverse as they come, I spent every opening day of the school year in a school in different neighborhoods of the city.

Often I was there because there were problems – overcrowding, leaks, asbestos, staff shortages...

But in every instance; every single instance, I was always struck by the line of parents registering their children. Newly moved into the neighborhood, newly arrived in the city or new to the country ... often these parents spoke little or no English.

The children, always neatly dressed and looking shy, are of every different shade and hue in my little town.

You'd see girls in veils and hoods and headdresses standing on a kindergarten line holding hands with a partner who might be blond or redheaded or darker or lighter... You'd hear several different languages being spoken, and strangely-accented English...

But one thing for sure. This was their school. No application to fill out; no interview required; no selection criteria, no fee.

Children have an unqualified, unfettered right to go to that school, and that school, whatever its faults and problems and

strengths, would ultimately make it possible for them to participate fully as citizens in America.

And where would a voucher take them? Where would the overwhelming majority of the children in Chicago or Boston or Philadelphia or New Orleans, or New York City go if not to the public school in their community? Where would the 78,000 children in Washington, DC – a battleground for vouchers – go? Or the over 50 million children in America who now have a right, an absolute right – to public school?

Now isn't that what civil rights are about?

And isn't the real fight the one that AFT is making – and with some success – to be sure every school a good one, to bring high standards and good discipline and quality teaching to every community?

For me it is, as I know it is for you.

Because I know that so many of you, like me, wouldn't be here without having had access to free, quality public schooling.

For me, the fight for civil rights, for women's rights, for labor rights, and for good education available to all, have always been part of the same ball of wax.

And I consider myself very fortunate to have grown up in the turbulent 50s and 60s, when the civil rights movement was at its height. I've always felt privileged to have been able to take part in that great movement.

And really it was the civil rights movement that brought me to the labor movement.

Yes, I was pre-disposed. Not because my parents were liberals -- they weren't. They weren't thinking about anything but surviving. But by the time I got to Brooklyn College, I had a well-developed sense of injustice. And I got it in school.

You may have heard me tell this story --

I got it in school because I grew up in a very poor community, in Coney Island, on the edge of another community called Seagate. Seagate was -- still is-- a middle-class enclave

cut off from the rest of us, literally, by a gate and security guards. You needed special identification to get through.

In those days of strict tracking, I was the only kid in my class from outside the gate. None of my friends from my own street were in my class. I did make friends with some of my classmates, though, and that enabled me to see how they lived. In big houses, with their own rooms, with big kitchens and separate dining rooms where tables were set for dinner in fine ways I had never seen.

The difference between haves and have-nots, starting then, made a big impression on me.

And the fact that, despite the great differences in our home lives, I got the same education as those "richer" kids did, made a big impression on me.

When I got to Brooklyn College, the Civil Rights Movement was heating up. I attended a rally on campus at which Bayard Rustin was the speaker.

And I became a follower of Rustin and the great A. Phillip Randolph... so when I started teaching, union activity was a natural.

And here I am, privileged to be able to play a continuing role fighting for the things I believe in so strongly.

And the right to a quality public education is one that I believe in with every fiber of my being.

Today public education is under unprecedented attack -- and at a time when our kids need good, free public schools more than ever.

Because without an education today, young people can't get even an entry level job. Good factory jobs today are high tech, and require an education. More than 20% of factory workers today have some college education.

And clearly, the way into the middle-class mainstream of American life has narrowed. Years ago, there were plenty of good union jobs in steel mills or auto plants or even garment manufacturing available to high school dropouts.

Today, a youngster who drops out of high school drops into an abyss.

So our struggle to improve the schools is more important than ever. And we're making headway. Dropout rates are down; graduation rates are up; scores are higher, and the gap between the achievement of black and white youngsters is narrowing.

But we still have a way to go. There are still 2 school systems in America -- one for poor children, and one for middle-class children.

Larger class sizes, buildings falling apart, highest teacher turnover, an appalling lack of books and supplies-- -- these you will find in poor urban and rural districts, not in most of suburbia.

No one is calling for vouchers in Scarsdale or Shaker Heights or Pacific Palisades -- quite the opposite.

And that is why this latest attack on public schools, coming from voucher advocates, is particularly outrageous and infuriating.

Because the bottom line of what they are saying is this: Take scarce dollars, taxpayer dollars, from the public schools,

particularly the schools which serve the overwhelming majority of poor children, and divert those dollars to private schools.

I don't know about you, but never has my sense of outrage -- been greater than in this latest development in the voucher fight.

Listen to this: "Free at Last: Black America Signs up for School Choice" -- an article not from the magazine of the NAACP but in the journal of the Heritage Foundation, one of the most conservative institutions in this country, an organization that has NEVER stepped up to the plate for civil rights or for poor children.

And listen to this: "School choice is the civil rights movement of the 1990's." This again from Heritage and picked up as a "mantra" by every other far-right so-called "think tank" and foundation and by the likes of Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey and others with no more fidelity or passion for civil rights than a stone has.

To hear the words "civil rights," so corrupted, to hear those momentous struggles appropriated for purposes that are just the opposite of what we fought for and fight for still... it is morally

outrageous. When organizations and individuals who have never fought for civil rights -- indeed, many of them have opposed it -- are suddenly marching under the banner of civil rights, I say , Excuse Me! When organizations and individuals who have never spent an ounce of energy trying to improve public schools or the lives of poor children -- indeed, many of them have opposed such efforts -- say they're backing vouchers in order to improve public schools and help poor children, I say, don't try to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to a kid from Brooklyn.

I said that Washington, DC is a battleground for vouchers – pushed for not by the local community but by the leadership of the Congress which watches the news about schools on television.

And a conservative Think Tank in DC called “The Institute for Justice” – another clever euphemism – has been very active in the writing of the legislation which the House passed – and the President vetoed.

A very interesting by-play took place in that fight, one which got little notice.

The U.S. Catholic Conference, which supports vouchers, also truly supports civil rights. They tried to get full federal civil rights rules into the voucher bill for D.C. But they were beaten by the so-called Institute for Justice, whose director then went around boasting about how they had kept those awful regulations out.

So much for vouchers and civil rights.

I know I'm preaching to the choir here. We've all been around too long and through too much and know too well how wrong vouchers are to be taken in easily. But there's a wider world outside this room, and outside this organization. This wider world IS increasingly being taken in by the new equity/civil rights language of the voucher movement. And, my friends, this strategy is very deliberate. It is aimed primarily at the minority community, at parents who are legitimately dissatisfied with the state of their public schools -- understandably so -- as well as to a more general public that is also deeply concerned about the condition of urban public schools.

And they are making converts, despite the fact that there really aren't enough places out there for as many children who want them, and despite the fact that in most cases the private schools do the choosing rather than the parents.

Furthermore, the cruelest part of this hoax is that it takes the voucher advocates off the hook for any responsibility for improving education, while the overwhelming majority of poor kids who remain in the public schools will have even less opportunity as resources and attention and hope are drained away from their schools.

So, my friends and colleagues, we have our work cut out for us. We have to reach out and make sure we keep our allies – the parents, organizations like the NAACP and People for the American Way, numerous Jewish, Baptist and other religious organizations, the labor movement, and yes -- the NEA.

We have to make the good fight, in the political arena, in the community.

But this is not a fight that will be won with politics alone. And so we will work even harder to improve the schools. We will redouble our efforts so that the schools our poor children go to have at least the same resources as those that wealthier children go to.

It is unconscionable that in too many places in America, teachers and paras and students are working under terrible conditions, sometimes in hallways and converted bathrooms, in overcrowded schools, often with leaky roofs and peeling plaster; without access to technology or to a rich and challenging curriculum, and where, often, there are not even enough books and supplies to go around.

And it is unconscionable that our poorest, neediest, and most vulnerable kids are often in overly large classes, in the worst-managed schools and districts, with the least access to the best-qualified teachers and administrators and to programs that work.

We want all our students to have access to schools where order and discipline are taken for granted; where high standards are in place; and where children get the help they need to meet them.

Today, we know much more than we ever did about what works, about what it takes to have first-rate schools and high student achievement. We don't just know it in theory. We see it in increasing numbers of schools, in many of our toughest neighborhoods. I've seen it first hand. And helping to spread those practices throughout all our schools is what the AFT is about. The challenge is to make every school and district a place that works for kids – and to do it now.

Our kids are capable of reaching the highest standards -- world class standards. Yes, some of them need more help getting there than others, and we have to make sure they get the help they need -- in the public schools.

None of us should defend schools we wouldn't want to send our own children to -- we should fight like hell to improve them --

and help to close and redesign them if that is necessary as a last resort. That's the real civil rights issue, for us: not only the preservation of public education -- but its dramatic improvement.

Not only keeping alive the ideal of equal educational opportunity for all children -- but making that ideal a reality in every school and district.

Before I conclude, I want to talk about one argument I hear over and over again against vouchers , and you may be surprised to hear this is not an argument I agree with.

And that is the so-called "skimming the cream" argument: that the so-called "best" kids will end up in the voucher schools, leaving public schools with -- with what?

Yes, more motivated parents will find a way to get and use a voucher.

Yes, private schools will select, and neither take nor keep children who are serious behavior problems or need special help or whose parents don't participate.

But the children left in public schools also will be the cream of the crop; as rich, as beautiful, as capable children, as any of the few who make it into private school.

All the children, whatever their circumstance, whatever their class or race or ethnicity or gender or sexual orientation have the ability and potential to grow into contributing participating citizens – and we will fight to make sure they have the opportunity to do that – by having equal, unfettered access to universal, free, high-quality, common public schooling – which is, in my view, one of the most fundamental rights a democracy must guarantee.

I know this audience agrees – and I thank you for all your caring and hard work.