

**Keynote Address to the
Ohio Federation of Teachers
by
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Thank you for inviting me to be with you at this important convention. I know, and everyone at the AFT knows, that this has been an extraordinarily challenging year for teachers in Ohio. You've faced tough battles on vouchers, on charter schools and on protecting proven programs that work to improve the quality of our teaching. I want you to know that we're very proud of all the work you've been doing – for your fellow educators, your schools and the children of Ohio. I know you don't always feel it, but your efforts are making a real difference for the future of this state and this country, and you should be very proud of the contribution you are making.

I was in Cleveland last year for the Regional Conference where the issue of the take-over of the Cleveland schools and the Cleveland Voucher Plan were the topics of the day; and while the voucher issue is still very much with us, I hope you're making progress on educational improvement. I know Barbara Bird-Bennett, your new superintendent in Cleveland, and I believe you can establish a cooperative and productive relationship with her. While you may not always agree, she's honest, fair and hard-working. In New York City, we worked very closely with her in turning around low-performing schools, and we were quite successful.

In Cincinnati, I know you're struggling against horrendous budget cuts. Tom has kept me well-informed, and I know what a terrific fight we've made in Cincinnati, and how it particularly hurts when the programs under specific attack are forward-looking reform programs spearheaded by our union and recognized nationally for their excellence. What this superintendent is doing is shortsighted and educationally harmful. Incomprehensible, really.

But aren't we always in a struggle? As a local leader in New York City, I fought budget cuts year after year. If it weren't for our union in these situations, schools would be infinitely worse off – an untold story, really.

And often, we prevail. A short time ago, Fran Lawrence and the Toledo Federation of Teachers were in a life and death contract fight. Now, the union is forging a relationship with community leaders and is developing a relationship

with the superintendent, working together to implement successful programs in low performing schools.

Too bad it takes these kinds of struggles to get management to see the light, but it does. We have to be advocating and agitating for school improvement, or it won't get done.

And frankly, the future of our industry, of public education, depends a great deal on what we do, on the fights we make – to defend the schools, and to improve them...

You know as well as I do that in far too many schools, children are not achieving. Yes, they come to us with many serious problems. Parents are not involved enough in supporting their own children. Superintendents come and go, fads come and go, resources are scarce, especially in the schools that need them most.

Most districts serving large numbers of poor children are doing it on much less than districts with stronger tax bases. Schools serving the neediest kids often have higher class sizes; more poorly paid teachers, and, therefore, more uncertified teachers and less ability to attract and keep the best. They have dilapidated, overcrowded buildings; fewer arts programs; less access to technology; and often, shamefully, an actual dearth of books and supplies.

Yet, despite serious resource problems, we have hundreds of successful schools in our poorest districts, and we're producing more and more.

They have a lot in common, including:

- Orderly, disciplined environments
- Good leadership, management and qualified teachers who work as a team, as colleagues
- Parental involvement
- High standards and expectations
- Challenging curriculum
- Use of proven research-based programs
- Quality staff development
- Timely extra help for students who need it...

So we have to keep working at the reform that produces school improvement...while we fight for the resources we need to make that happen... And, at the same time, we have to keep fighting the people who want to privatize; who want to do to schools what's been done to health care: guarantee that the well-off get what they need and leave everyone else to fend for themselves.

Through privatization and vouchers and now, in too many cases, unaccountable charter schools, there are very strong forces who are openly

seeking the payment of scarce public dollars for what are essentially private schools.

The battle to save public education is being fought nationally, and state by state. Our opponents have millions of dollars committed to their campaign. They are prepared for extensive fights in Congress, in state houses and in city halls. They have a sophisticated strategy and the financial strength to fight us on many fronts simultaneously, and they are going to get tougher.

Let me take a moment to tell you about what we're facing in the Reauthorization of ESEA: Efforts to voucherize (which we killed with an alliance with Catholic and private schools), to block grant, to eliminate paraprofessionals... And it's the same people... the voucherites, who actually call Title I "a waste"! --This is about the only program that helps level the playing field for poor kids.

None of us should underestimate the enormity of the fight we're in, and the resources and energy that will be required for us to win. We defeated voucher and tuition tax credit proposals in ballot measures all over the country last fall, but their proponents keep coming back. In Colorado, a coalition of business, parents and teachers defeated the effort to take tax dollars and send them to religious and private schools. But now, the proposal is back in the legislature. In New York, Mayor Giuliani's effort to create a voucher program for the city schools is one vote shy of approval in the city's school board. In Florida, newly elected Governor Jeb Bush is moving forward quickly to gain approval of his voucher plan, and the state legislature is bowing to his pressure.

And it is not just in those places. We are fighting vouchers and tuition tax credit proposals in Arizona, California, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Texas.

Here in Ohio, not only do you have an ongoing voucher threat, you are devoting tremendous energy to defeat a plan to raise the caps on charter schools. You know how tough the fight has been and will continue to be. Well, you're not alone. The AFT and our affiliates are fighting bad charter school bills in more than 20 state legislatures.

We believe there is room in public school districts for charter schools. But in too many cases, the proponents of charter schools are just looking for a chance to make a quick buck on kids who need help. They want to create schools where standards are not enforced, teachers are not licensed, and collective bargaining is a thing of the past. Even in New York State, where we have a long record of legislative accomplishment, we were unable to counter the passage of a flawed charter school bill.

The governors and legislatures enacting these laws are making greater and greater demands on public schools – higher standards, high stakes assessments, accountability provisions – and that’s OK. But they’re schizophrenic when it comes to charter schools. Then standards, accountability, and certified teachers become unimportant. In states from Rhode Island to Washington, from Wisconsin to Texas, we are in the thick of battle.

And at the same time, and as part of that fight for survival, we’re working on real reforms that are helping to improve schools from coast to coast. We’re creating coalitions, working with partners – parents, school boards, principals, even some business leaders and, of course, our allies in labor. Our opponents advance their anti-public school agenda by attacking teachers and our union. They claim that we stand in the way of reform. But in fact, in so many places, including here in Ohio, we’ve taken the lead on reform, and actually the effort to raise standards and achievement is working.

Schools are improving. Nationally, test scores are up, dropout rates are down, and more kids than ever before are going on to college. Our public schools are on the move; they are demanding more of students and many kids are meeting the challenge. The 1998 NAEP results showed encouraging signs of progress, particularly for eighth graders, and especially among lower performing students. There were improvements for both male and female students, for white and black students, and for public school students overall.

Our schools are educating kids from the broadest economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds in the world. Yes, there is still much more that needs to be done, especially in urban centers where the achievement gap is still too wide. But across the country, reforms like smaller class sizes, especially in the early years, are working. Using research-based programs to teach kids literacy and math is working, especially where on-going professional development and peer review programs are part of the mix.

A great change is taking place in America’s schools, and teachers and teacher unionists are leading the way. School districts like District 2 in New York City are proving that high standards can be met when the commitment exists to help students improve. For about eight years, District 2 has implemented a successful literacy program that provides sustained, high-quality professional development for teachers and individualized help for the kids who need it. It has gotten excellent results with all children, but especially with those who were having big problems becoming proficient readers.

In North Carolina, reformers have made sure that curricula and textbooks are in line with the standards for what students are expected to know, and additional resources are made available to schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged students. As a result, all students, especially low-performing students, have made significant gains on both state and national tests. And in

Chicago, with the cooperation and help of our affiliate, Mayor Daley and the school systems' CEO Paul Vallas have spent more than \$2 million on capital improvements and added more than 630 classrooms. The district ended social promotion while providing extensive after school, summer school, and remediation programs to help youngsters catch up, leading Time magazine to declare that "few can deny that Chicago's public schools are enjoying a slow but steady revival."

And they did it cooperatively, with the union. Not that they don't have their conflicts – but overall the relationship is working. It's a two-way street.

So – it can be done; it's being done. But it's a struggle all the way. The opponents of public education show no signs of standing down. And, as we know, their successes will leave the students who remain in public school with even fewer resources than we have today – the explosion of charter schools in Cincinnati, for example, is expected to drain from 5 to 6 million dollars from the public school system by next year – making it that much tougher to continue the successful improvement efforts that have been working up to now.

Now, let me tell you honestly -- we can prevail, but not unless we take steps to strengthen our ability to fight effectively -- for what we need to improve schools, and to defeat those who want to abandon public education. And that is why we have to build strong state organizations. I know this isn't easy. I know our members don't like to pay more dues. But we need to tell them why it's essential to be strong at the state (and national) level. They can understand, if we explain to them that we need to have the capacity to do political action, to advocate for school improvement, and to communicate our point of view. And we can't do that without resources.

In California, for example, our state fed learned the hard way – with two brutal campaigns on vouchers and Paycheck Deception – that they need to have a statewide infrastructure in place.

In Florida, without a state organization, they couldn't make the fight they're in the throes of to stop Jeb Bush's voucher program and his awful punishing "accountability" proposals (to take money away from schools whose students don't perform on the test, and to reduce the teachers' salaries by 5%!).

I could go on.

At the national office, because of what we're facing nationwide, we're in the process of revamping our political and legislative departments, creating a field component, headed by Juanita Dunlap Smith, whom many of you know. We're going to work with our state federations to help them put permanent campaign

infrastructures in place. We've already been working with Ron and your leadership.

But it can't be done without more resources.

I hope you'll support your state federation's effort to expand and improve the union's ability to fight statewide. The AFT will continue to work closely with your leadership and to provide all the help we can.

We have a strong unified union – and we need to make it even stronger in these tough times. We've got a lot going for us, and I know that ultimately we will win.

Thank you all for everything you are doing and for everything that we will do together in the days and years ahead – for the members we serve, and for the children and values we care so much about.