



A Union of Professionals

**Edward J. McElroy, President
American Federation of Teachers
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On behalf of AFT secretary-treasurer Nat LaCour and executive vice president Antonia Cortese, I would like to welcome you to QuEST 2005.

It's been one year since I became president of the AFT. As you know, I was elected president after Sandy Feldman stepped down for health reasons. Sandy is doing well and is enjoying an active retirement. When I spoke with her last she asked me to send her regards and to thank you for the outpouring of support you have shown her.

What a year it's been. Despite the AFT's unprecedented political efforts in the 2004 elections, we couldn't do it all. John Kerry, the candidate with a 97 percent lifetime AFT voting record, was not elected to the White House. Since the election, we have seen additional tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, and continued service cuts for everyone else. There have been attacks on unions and limits to collective bargaining. President Bush has sharpened his sales pitch to undermine the basic tenets and stability of Social Security, one of America's most successful social investment programs. He's tried to push through CAFTA – this year's NAFTA. The only thing CAFTA will do is take jobs from hard-working people here and undermine hard-working people abroad. The president submitted a budget earlier this year which, if passed, will result in the first reduction in funding for the U.S. Department of Education in more than a decade. Even President Bush's signature education law is getting a small portion of what's left over after his tax cuts have been paid for. There have been some welcome changes to the No Child Left Behind Act, but not in ways that address the fundamental problems with the law.

The results of the 2004 elections don't mean we should give up or hibernate for four years. In fact, those elections marked a new chapter for our political efforts. We are advancing an agenda, despite not having all the allies in Congress we would like. We are doing more to reach across the aisle – working with the Bush administration where we can and finding common ground with members of Congress with whom we have not always seen eye-to-eye. We are involving AFT members and leaders in our outreach to members of Congress in their home districts – educating lawmakers on issues of importance to our members and letting them know that we are paying attention to what's happening on Capitol Hill.

In short, we are acting like the education union built for tough times that we are.

One of the key ways we are doing this is through our efforts to fix problems with the No Child Left Behind Act. The AFT has launched a campaign to do just that. The theme of the campaign, "No Child Left Behind: Let's Get It Right," reflects our commitment to accountability and high standards for students, staff and schools. During the initial phase of the campaign, we are:

- meeting with policymakers in Washington and advocating for constructive changes to the law;



- we are mobilizing our state and local leaders and members to get the word out about the problems with this law;
- and we are running print and radio advertisements. The stakes are too high for us to wait until the reauthorization of NCLB before we focus on the necessary improvements to this law.

We are not new to trying to shape NCLB into a better law. Of course, this would have been stronger legislation if we called all the shots on Capitol Hill, but NCLB would have been a much worse law without our union's input. The AFT helped fight off plans to cut Title I funding for paraprofessionals and helped ensure that states had more flexibility in defining what constitutes a highly qualified teacher. And, AFT played a prominent role in protecting collective bargaining rights and ensuring that NCLB did not become a voucher or block grant program that would have drained significant resources from our public schools.

Nevertheless, in my travels around the country, I have heard teachers and paraprofessionals express incredible frustration. I hear it from experienced teachers at the top of their game, from newcomers whose excitement is dimming all too quickly, and from all sorts of teachers in between. A major cause of their dissatisfaction is the No Child Left Behind Act and the way it's been implemented. A recent survey of more than 1,000 AFT teachers revealed similar results. While three out of four teachers are unhappy with NCLB, they overwhelmingly do not want to repeal it. As our campaign states, they want to change it and get it right.

This is not sour grapes from teachers who want to stick to "business as usual." Some of the most compelling concerns about the effects of this law have come from teachers who by any measure hold themselves and their students to high standards. But they are concerned that testing, not standards, is driving the system. They worry that important parts of the curriculum are getting crowded out in the name of "reform."

The AFT supports the underlying goals of NCLB: to raise standards for all children and, in particular, to meet the needs of disadvantaged children; to ensure there is a well-qualified teacher in every classroom; to provide extra support for low-performing students; and to "keep score," as my colleague John Cole from Texas puts it, by using fair and accurate accountability measures.

Unfortunately, what I hear more and more is that those good intentions have given way to unintended – and unacceptable – consequences. Teachers understand how important it is to focus on literacy and math, but they are concerned that other content areas are getting left behind. They resent that No Child Left Behind has in many places derailed reforms or programs that were producing positive results. The promised funding for the law has not materialized, despite its many new requirements. And many teachers have told me that the accountability measures are unfair and inaccurate ways of determining student and school performance. Not surprisingly, testing and measurement experts confirm this view.

It's no secret that the central provision of NCLB, the adequate yearly progress measure (or AYP), doesn't really measure progress. It doesn't even measure the same students over time, like from one grade to the next or from the beginning to the end of the school year. We have all heard of schools being identified as "failing," when they actually have made commendable progress. Many schools that missed the mark did so because their students started far behind – even before they started formal schooling -- and could not reach the arbitrary AYP benchmarks.

Ineffective schools *should* be identified, but right now there is ample evidence that many so-called failing schools are actually making more progress with their students than many schools that make AYP. The converse is true, as well. Some schools whose students started out at an advantage have gone downward. But because these schools are above NCLB's arbitrary standard, they are deemed successful.

The AFT will never back away from high standards and accountability, but it is important to get the regulations we place on teachers and schools right. Good things have come out of this law, like the disaggregation of data, which has helped focus attention on students in need of more help.

However, where provisions of the law work against – not for – students and schools, the AFT is working to change them. Indeed, NCLB will never work without changes in the law, proper implementation and necessary funding. The entire standards movement is in jeopardy if the shortcomings of NCLB are left unaddressed.

The No Child Left Behind Act includes the latest reauthorization of Title I, a landmark program first adopted 40 years ago. The children who benefit from Title I are America's most disadvantaged students – by and large, they are the students we teach. We do not want to scrap this law. We want to make it better. And that is what the AFT's campaign is about.

You'll hear more about No Child Left Behind tomorrow from Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. Secretary Spellings is someone I believe we can work with – indeed, she is someone we *have* worked with and who already has made some important modifications to this law.

For example, the deadline for paraprofessionals to meet NCLB mandates initially was set for the middle of the coming school year rather than being in line with other deadlines in the law which are set for the *end* of the school year. In May, I wrote Secretary Spellings a letter outlining AFT's concerns about the paraprofessional deadlines, and I followed up on the issue at a meeting with her in June. The following week, the department announced that it would align the paraprofessional and teacher requirements so that they are consistent.

This is a commonsense change that makes a real difference in a lot of people's lives. It didn't happen just because I talked to Secretary Spellings about it. Nevertheless, it was a rule that had been allowed to stand until she came to office. We appreciate the Secretary's openness and her willingness to consider sensible changes to the law, and I look forward to continuing to work with her.

A few years back, I came across a classified ad that probably wouldn't get too many serious applicants:

"College graduate," it read. *"...(master's degree preferred). Excellent communication and leadership skills required.... Position allows employee to exercise typing, clerical, law enforcement, and social work skills.... Typical workweek: 50 hours. Starting salary: \$31,350 with the possibility of earning \$45,500 after only 15 years, but the work has many intrinsic rewards."*

The job being "advertised," of course, was that of a teacher. I'm sure you could add some color to that job description. Linda Darling-Hammond, who is well-known for her work on teacher quality,

penned that classified ad more than 20 years ago. I updated the salary figures to reflect today's princely sums.

Teaching is an incredibly complicated and difficult job, and while it is rewarding, for most teachers it is not rewarding in a way that leaves them with a whole lot of extra cash at the end of the month. The fact is that, from a compensation perspective, it's a lousy job.

In my first speech as AFT president at the 2004 convention, I focused on America's teacher retention problem. Many elements contribute to the perpetually revolving schoolhouse door, but inadequate teacher compensation undoubtedly is a primary factor for many who leave the profession and for many who never enter the profession for which they have been trained. The AFT survey found that only one teacher in 10 is very satisfied with her salary. That means that current pay systems aren't doing enough to fairly compensate teachers for the important work they do.

We must move toward a different approach to teacher compensation. Such a movement already is under way; unfortunately, many of these proposals are intended to pay only a few people higher salaries, rather than pay all teachers a professional wage. Teachers should not have to toil for a decade or longer to be paid the same amount a recent college graduate can make in another field.

What some people refer to as merit pay has been proposed as an alternative to the traditional salary schedule as a way to reward outstanding teachers, spark improved performance, and provide incentives for good teachers to enter and stay in the profession. Unfortunately, most merit pay plans both in and out of education have been conceived, structured or carried out in such a way that they have failed to achieve what they set out to do.

There is a perception that teacher unions flat-out oppose changes to current compensation systems. The fact is that a number of our local unions have negotiated changes to traditional pay plans, and it's not as though compensation plans are especially progressive in places where there is no collective bargaining. The AFT has long believed that professional pay is central to promoting teacher quality – and we will continue to explore promising changes to the way teachers are paid.

There is much to commend the traditional salary system – it eliminates unfair bias and has a sensible foundation: that the more you know about teaching and the longer you do it, the better you should be at it. But it has not resulted in compensation for teachers that reflects the professional nature of their work. Most teachers' salaries neither reflect the requirements needed to enter the profession nor the growing demands on teachers to help all students reach ever-increasing levels of achievement.

Traditional teacher pay systems have a number of other shortcomings. In many places, it takes an extremely long time to reach the top of the schedule, which hurts teacher recruitment and retention efforts. A rigid salary schedule does not reward additional skills and knowledge that benefit children, such as National Board Certification, or extraordinary circumstances, such as teaching in hard-to-staff schools.

That's not to say that you can't find fault with alternate pay plans. Many experiments with this type of compensation have failed because they lacked clear and objective criteria for who would qualify and how, they opened the door to favoritism and discrimination, they instituted quotas

instead of rewarding all who were worthy of additional compensation, and they bred harmful competition among teachers rather than cooperation toward the common goal of helping all students succeed. Unfortunately, many of the compensation plans proposed today still have many of these flaws.

But there are different, more promising ways to go about compensating teachers as the professionals they are. First and foremost, a professional compensation system starts with competitive base pay and benefits for *all* teachers. Beyond that, AFT affiliates have implemented or tried to implement additional pay options such as: pay for additional roles, for National Board Certification, teaching in hard-to-staff schools, schoolwide improvements, and for the knowledge and skills teachers demonstrate in the classroom.

In addition to an adequate salary base for all teachers, a professional compensation system must be bargained with the teachers' representative; it must have sufficient funding; credible, agreed-upon standards and measures of professional practice; a well-developed and adequately funded professional development system; labor/management collaboration based on mutual trust and respect; and incentives that are available to all eligible teachers, without quotas or reductions in individual monetary amounts as more teachers qualify.

Those are the basic features that must be incorporated into any professional compensation system, but districts can go beyond these essentials. Systems could include incentives that focus on acquiring knowledge and skills that support specific goals, such as earning a second credential in a shortage field. Additional incentives could be offered for assuming new responsibilities, such as mentoring other teachers or working in hard-to-staff schools.

Alternate pay plans are not going away, and if we don't put forth thoughtful and promising proposals, we could end up doing battle against the worst kinds of compensation schemes – and we've faced these in the past.

Almost everyone recognizes that we just don't pay teachers enough. The governor of California, on the other hand, wants single-handedly to impose his own ideas about how teachers should be compensated; or, if he can't get his way, he's pushing a previously unscheduled election this fall. This special election would cost California taxpayers tens of millions of dollars, and the governor's scheme could cost teachers far more.

I can't tell you how many times over the years I have said, "These are the toughest times public education and unions have ever been in." And each time I've meant it. But today, when I talk about the tough times we're experiencing, I *really* mean it.

The good news is that the AFT is built for tough times. We are closing in on 25 years of membership growth, and while we have to do even better, we are up to the tasks ahead of us.

Teacher unions like the AFT need to live up to the fearsome reputation our opponents have tagged us with: That we can mobilize members throughout the country to rise up against threats to public education and other vital public institutions. That our organizing ability is without equal. That when we put out important information, our members listen, and what's more, they spread it around.

Let's make sure that our reality is every bit as impressive as our reputation. Just as it is not right for a union to collect dues but not provide services to its members, it's not right for members simply to pay dues and expect that someone else will fight all their battles. AFT's influence and effectiveness can be magnified countless times over when our members are active and engaged.

One of the ways we intend to do this is through the AFT's Activists for Congressional Education program, which we call ACE. We want to build on the unprecedented member activism that we saw in the 2004 presidential campaign. We are working with AFT members to encourage them to meet with their congressional representatives -- in their home districts at least twice a year -- to discuss key legislative issues.

Members of Congress are much more responsive when they hear from people who live in the districts they represent. The first ACE visits took place over the Memorial Day recess. AFT activists met with both Democratic and Republican members of Congress to discuss ways to improve the No Child Left Behind Act, proposed changes to Social Security, and federal budget shortfalls and priorities.

I think this sort of activism is going to reap great dividends. There's a big difference between Jane Smith meeting with her congressman representing only herself (if she could even get the meeting) and Jane Smith talking with that same elected official representing her fellow members in her local, state or national union.

Just as classroom teachers and paraprofessionals are better off having a strong union in their corner, the AFT is stronger for being a part of the larger labor movement. Without the support of other organized groups, we cannot achieve the goal of excellent, accessible public education for all or the other goals that are so important to our members and those they serve. For decades and generations, we have advanced these causes through the AFL-CIO.

In recent months, there have been numerous discussions about the structure, operations and future of the AFL-CIO. Many of these ideas are worthy of serious consideration, and the discussions initially were reasonable. But not all proposals are worthy of consideration. Some unions are even threatening to leave the AFL-CIO if all of their demands are not met. These threatening actions could do serious harm to the labor movement and to working people for many years to come.

The AFT is a successful, large union -- but we couldn't have existed without the help we received from the larger labor movement. The United Auto Workers, the Garment Workers, the Steelworkers, and the national AFL-CIO all gave the AFT support at times when we needed it. And we've done the same for other unions, because we have an unshakable belief that workers and unions, whether in education or other fields, are stronger when we are united.

Unfortunately, some union leaders seem willing to split the labor movement if they don't get their way. I'll be straight with you: When someone advances an idea that could divide and destroy the labor movement, they better have unassailable reasons for it. Losing a policy fight, or not being able to muster the votes to unseat a person you don't support are not good enough reasons. Those threatening to disaffiliate have the potential to do what our opponents have not been able to do -- split the union movement.

This is not to say that the AFL-CIO is not in need of change. The AFT has issued recommendations for labor's renewal, including suggestions for improving national, state and local programs and effectiveness. Many other unions and the officers of the AFL-CIO have introduced proposals for change, as well. The AFT will continue to work from inside the AFL-CIO to make productive changes. In fact, with the AFL-CIO convention just around the corner, our efforts to maintain a strong labor federation are at their most critical juncture, and along with our work here, we're working on that issue as well.

Everyone in this country who is looking to have a better life, a better country and better prospects for their children is set back by anything that weakens the labor movement. There is lots of high-sounding rhetoric flying around out there, but much of it amounts to the height of irresponsibility.

I hope these discussions can get back on course so that the needs of working people and their families truly can come first.

I suspect you feel like your plate is pretty full already. And no one could accuse you of sitting idle. After all, look at what you're doing on this fine summer day. But I am asking you to do more. You are classroom teachers and paraprofessionals. You have the inside scoop on what's going on in our schools. Parents and the public trust you.

You care about strengthening public education; otherwise you wouldn't be here. You are ambassadors for all that is right with our public schools as well as advocates for making the necessary changes so all students get the education they deserve.

Don't just carry your union card. Carry the union with you in all you do. Continue to take advantage of the professional development opportunities your union offers you. Be a voice for the fact that unionism and professionalism go hand in hand. Talk to your colleagues not only about joining the AFT, but about being active members who make our union that much better. Be active on local, state and federal issues that affect you, your colleagues, the students you teach, your family and the community in which you live. Ask – we all know that members and non-members alike can go years without even being asked to join the union or to get involved in meaningful ways. Talk to your family and neighbors about what you see in the school you work in. What's working? That's a story that doesn't get out there enough. What needs to be fixed and what should be done to fix it? There is no shortage of theories about how to turn around troubled schools advanced by people who haven't set foot in a school in modern memory. We need more ideas from people like you -- the true classroom experts -- to get some serious play.

I want to thank you for being here. It's a sign of your tremendous commitment to your profession. And I want to thank you for ALL that you do. I know that many of you also attend AFT conventions where our members and local leaders set the course for our union. And I know that many of you are very active at the local level. It's not easy, but it *is* very important.

If you haven't been active before, you need to be. If you want anything to happen, whether it's better laws, education policy, compensation, or what have you – you need to get involved. Our strength is our members, and that means you.

We need to energize ourselves and our fellow union members more than ever. So while I am asking you to do your part, I assure you that the AFT will never stop fighting for you, for our schools and for the students you teach.

Thank you.

For more information, please contact:

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