



*A Union of Professionals*

## **220,000 Teachers a Year: Putting First-Class Educators in Every Classroom**

**Remarks by Sandra Feldman  
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Economic Club of Detroit  
January 18, 2000**

I am honored to be here at the Economic Club of Detroit.

This is the pre-eminent public forum in a city that's used to tackling the toughest problems with free-wheeling debates. And these arguments often produce an agenda for action for Detroit--and frequently, historically, for our nation as well.

In 1940, as we prepared for the fight against fascism, Walter Reuther offered an ambitious plan to retool the auto industry and retrain the workers, so that they could produce, in a phrase he made famous, "500 planes a day." He believed that if America offered the skilled and dedicated workers of our industrial heartland the resources they needed, they could rise to the challenge of replenishing the arsenal of democracy.

Reuther declared--and I quote:

"England's battles, it used to be said, were won on the playing fields of Eton. This plan is put forward in the belief that America's can be won on the assembly lines of Detroit."

It took some time, but, eventually, America pursued the vision that Reuther presented. And not only did we defeat fascism but we further developed the industrial might that built three decades of postwar prosperity and ensured that American democracy would prevail against Soviet totalitarianism.

Now, our nation is at peace, our people are competing in a new global economy based on information, and America's battles will be won or lost in our public schools --where 90 percent of our children are preparing to be tomorrow's workers, citizens, and parents.

The challenge we're engaged in today is striving to reach the highest standards of achievement in all our schools--especially those in low-income communities, from our inner cities to our rural areas.

Let me say at the outset: This can be done.

But, just as a lot of families are being left out of economic opportunity, even in the midst of our great new prosperity, a lot of kids are being left out of educational opportunity, even in the midst of our hard-won improvements.

Much needs to be done for kids from low-income families--inside and outside the schools.

We can--and must--help their families by raising the minimum wage, expanding the earned income tax credit, and extending health insurance to every household.

We can--and must--help the children and their schools by: offering every child a quality, pre-school education; intervening early and effectively when kids fall behind; and providing small classes in the early grades--and I'm proud that the Detroit Federation of Teachers is fighting for, and beginning to win, this goal.

And, as the Clinton/Gore Administration is proposing, we need to rebuild our aged and overcrowded schools, so our kids will feel the future opening up for them--and not the ceiling falling down on them.

Our children and our classrooms have many needs, but today I want to focus on one of the most fundamental: the need for excellent teachers.

We can't reach first-class standards without first-class teachers--dedicated professionals who have a wide and deep understanding of their subject and a repertoire of proven strategies for delivering it to their students.

Over the next 10 years, we need to recruit, train, hire and retain more than 2 million teachers, according to the best estimates. Just as America's challenge 60 years ago was to produce 500 planes a day, our challenge now is to prepare over 200,000 teachers a year--and not just any teachers, but qualified, dedicated teachers in every subject, for every school, in every city and suburb and small town in this country.

I am here today to offer ideas for how we can make sure that this **new** generation of teachers will be qualified and capable of teaching to the tough new standards demanded by educational improvements in this country and exacting economic competition all across the world.

It won't be easy. We can't do it on the cheap. We'll have to ask more of all of our teachers--from the newcomers to the old-timers. And we'll have to find new ways to reward the best and remove the worst.

That is why I'm calling for a new social compact similar to the ones that have seen our nation through other historic challenges--a national commitment to offer teachers higher salaries at the same time we insist that they meet higher standards. We need both components of that compact--high salaries and high standards.

To attract the best teachers and keep them in the profession, we'll need to raise salaries **and** offer additional incentives for new knowledge, new skills, new responsibilities, outstanding performance, and taking on the toughest assignments.

To keep the confidence of the parents and taxpayers, we'll need new standards for quality and accountability, including ideas that some teachers and our unions have opposed in the past. These ideas include the requirement that teachers pass a rigorous peer review before being awarded tenure, as well as making modifications in the traditional "single salary schedule" for teachers that has been based almost entirely on levels of education and years of experience. And we need other trailblazing initiatives as well, such as making sure that elementary school teachers are equipped with proven techniques based on the most recent research breakthroughs in teaching reading.

From the federal level to our states and our major cities, public officials are addressing this problem and offering solutions. Many of these ideas are promising--such as Vice President Gore's proposal that the federal government work with the states to offer incentives for veteran teachers to serve in poor communities.

While these goals can and must be pursued in the legislative arena, they should also be promoted at the bargaining table. At the AFT, we are working on ideas for how teacher unions can use our union agreements to advance this social contract of higher salaries and higher standards--ideas we hope will get the respectful attention and support of school administrators.

The time is right. This can be done. And, in many ways, it's now or never.

We face the challenge of finding over 2 million new teachers because of the anticipated retirement of more than a million veteran teachers, the growth of student enrollments, and our critically important and long-overdue efforts to reduce class sizes. Those of you in the business community can easily understand the enormity of that challenge to a system that has to educate 52 million youngsters.

Today's schools, especially in urban areas, are already in the throes of the problem of finding and keeping good teachers.

There are shortages in important areas of expertise--math, science, special education, and bilingual education. More and more school systems are granting emergency credentials to unprepared or under-prepared teachers, or are assigning teachers to subjects they are not equipped to teach. Efforts are being made--to recruit teachers from the military, from non-traditional backgrounds, even from overseas. We have retired executives, Troops to Teachers, Teach for America, Americorps, and more.

These are good programs, and AFT supports them. But they are not making a dent in the overall need--and especially not where the problems are the worst--in schools where conditions are rough, where pay is low, and where children are needy.

In low-income, mostly minority schools, students have less than a 50 percent chance of having a certified math teacher. They lose 50 percent of their teachers in the first three to five years of teaching, leaving them without the stability and continuity of experienced staff.

This is one more way--and an incredibly important one--that our society shortchanges poor kids. It is a national disgrace, and it must not continue.

Without excellent teachers to get the job done, our nation's schools will not be able to continue our progress toward setting and meeting high standards.

In a relatively short time, we've gone from being a nation that didn't even talk about academic standards to one where high standards are becoming the norm.

And these reforms are getting results--fewer high school dropouts; higher scores; and success stories of schools that are turning themselves around, even in communities where hope has been a scarce commodity.

The challenge now is to keep the standards movement going forward and do what it takes to reach every child in every classroom in every community in this country with the help they need to reach them.

As someone who grew up in public housing and built her future in our public schools and colleges, let me tell you:

We must not allow poverty to be an excuse for poor academic achievement--not for the students, not for the teachers, and not for the schools. But neither can we ignore its consequences, and overcoming them takes more than we've been giving so far. For young people from low and moderate-income families, education is the only opportunity to make their way in the world.

Overwhelmingly, our nation's teachers understand this--especially those in the major cities where the going is toughest and where the membership of our union is concentrated. They want the standards movement to continue, even if it means more demands on them.

The Albert Shanker Institute--a fledgling think tank named for the late AFT president who championed many of the reforms we are discussing today--recently conducted a survey about standards that it gave to teachers who are AFT members and the principals in their schools.

The high standards were supported overwhelmingly: by 71 percent of the teachers and two-thirds of the principals--and the strongest support came from the teachers and principals in high-poverty urban areas.

But most of these teachers say that more needs to be done to help their students, and most of them frankly admit that they've been inadequately prepared to teach to the higher standards. And nearly two-thirds say they need more professional development even if it means lengthening the school day or year.

We must listen to the voices of today's teachers as we prepare to hire tomorrow's teachers. Right now, before it is too late, we must prepare for well-educated teachers in every classroom.

Here, briefly, are 10 things we should be doing right now:

**First:** Prepare new teachers better before they begin their careers.

Good teachers need to be really well educated--as our good teachers **today** are. They need to know--deeply--the subject they teach. And they need to know how to teach.

A rigorous college education is essential--but it isn't enough. School districts should work with universities to provide meaningful, practical experience in the classroom for prospective teachers.

**Second:** Special attention must be paid to teaching reading--the fundamental skill on which all education depends.

Children who don't learn to read early and well are unlikely to learn anything else. And they're going to have a hard time supporting themselves in a new economy where processing information is a skill needed to build cars as well as computers.

As with so much else in school and in life, reading problems hit hardest at the kids in greatest need. For children from poor families, the rates of reading failure are high. On average they come to school already two to four years behind in vocabulary and other skills.

But the good news is: Thanks to new research, the knowledge now exists to teach almost all children how to read well.

We need to make sure that new teachers learn these techniques and experienced teachers have the professional development that allows them to benefit from them, too--especially teachers and paraprofessionals from kindergarten through grade 3.

**Third:** Provide immediate and ongoing support on the job for new teachers.

This happens in most other professions, and in the schools that succeed in the advanced nations we're competing with around the world. New teachers should develop and perfect their teaching skills by closely observing, meeting with, and learning from their more experienced colleagues in an organized, institutionalized program of mentoring. In the AFT, we seek to bargain for programs that provide experienced teachers with an active part in improving their colleagues' teaching. But that effort requires a partner on the management side, and unfortunately, it isn't happening as much as it should. Fortunately, in Dearborn, it is--and it's making a difference in quality.

**Fourth:** Find fair and workable ways to remove incompetent teachers. We need to ensure due process **and** quality.

In too many schools, teachers are subject to perfunctory or arbitrary reviews by administrators who don't understand the subject matter themselves. It is quite common, for example, to have a principal who is a former phys ed teacher evaluating a physics teacher.

We don't advocate eliminating administrator responsibility; the buck has to stop somewhere, and school leadership is really important.

But the best--and most rigorous--evaluations are by teachers who know the discipline, know about teaching, and know from painful experience that they don't want to face the failures of an incompetent colleague in their own classroom next year.

That is why we are bargaining more and more peer assistance and peer review programs where experienced, high-quality teachers evaluate their less-experienced colleagues. They take an active role in helping those in need of improvement. And, with those who don't measure up, even after extensive help, they counsel them out of the profession.

We should take this proven educational reform to its logical next step. In addition to the reviews that now exist, no teacher in any classroom in any school in any community in this country should receive tenure without undergoing a successful peer review.

**Fifth:** We should call a halt to the tactics that school systems use to take the easy way out of the challenge of finding first-class teachers in every subject.

It's way past time to eliminate emergency credentials and out-of-field teaching. If necessary, school districts should offer incentives to credentialed teachers to take on additional courses in

their field, or entice qualified veteran teachers to put off retirement. We can't afford to shortchange our children because the adults in charge are unwilling to address this problem.

**Sixth:** We must have ongoing, meaningful professional development in every school and district. Most large companies consider ongoing training of staff a part of doing business. School districts must adopt that practice and provide the resources for it.

Teachers need to keep current with the latest knowledge in their subject areas and with proven teaching techniques, and they need to have the time to meet with colleagues and help each other unlock the difficulties students often present.

We need to change the entire atmosphere in schools to encourage and institutionalize collegiality and the quest for constant improvement.

**Seventh:** And in that spirit, we need new roles for teachers.

Teachers aren't interchangeable parts. We can't recruit or retain the best people to our profession, and we can't make the most of their talents, when teachers can't look forward to new challenges and increased rewards unless they leave the classroom to become administrators.

We need to do much more to extend and expand the role of mentors, of master teachers-- excellent and experienced educators who help their colleagues and the school in many ways.

**Eighth:** We need to find new ways to develop, recognize, and reward the knowledge, skills, and responsibilities these roles require.

That may mean salary premiums for teachers in subjects where talent is urgently needed but in short supply.

That can mean extra pay for teachers in schools that are hard to staff, and where longer days and years and extraordinary effort is required.

And that also can mean beginning a new and serious discussion of rewarding special skills, special knowledge, special responsibilities, and special accomplishments--from earning advanced degrees, to mentoring colleagues, or working with teams of colleagues to attain dramatic improvements in student achievement.

In the past, too many initiatives that went under the label of "merit pay" were under-funded and poorly planned, without objective standards and fair systems for determining who qualified.

But new ways to reward great teaching are being developed. Many states now provide bonuses to faculties in schools that achieve steady improvement. But only 14 states provide salary supplements for the teachers who qualify as master teachers through the National Board Certification process--and that's one merit pay plan that has real merit, and that teachers believe in.

**Ninth:** Raise teacher salaries significantly. As we answer the challenge of finding more than 2 million new teachers, we've got to get real.

For years, the teaching profession could count on discrimination, depression, and recession to act as its recruiting agents. But, thankfully, women and minorities can now explore other

professional opportunities. And a booming economy offers exciting opportunities for young women and men from every background. But the market competition idea isn't working here.

Urban and rural school districts across the nation, where the most serious shortages of good teachers are, are struggling to recruit. They don't have the tax base or the resources to compete with higher-paying suburbs, let alone other professions.

Governors and state legislators will have to step up to the plate here--and perhaps even the federal government, as Vice President Gore has suggested.

In a knowledge-driven full-employment economy, teaching must offer competitive salaries. With starting salaries of little more than \$25,000, average salaries of less than \$40,000, and little opportunity for advancement, we can look forward to shortages of quantity and quality, and we'll shortchange our kids and our country far into the future.

**Tenth:** And finally, teacher unions need to continue to do our part as architects of the future and agents of reform.

Virtually every improvement strategy I've mentioned today--from higher standards to peer review--was invented or championed by the AFT at the local and national levels. We have been at the cutting edge of turning around low-performing schools, and pushing for research-proven programs.

Further, at our professional issues conference last summer, I discussed the idea of streamlined, information-age contracts that would set scales for salaries and benefits, provide due process, and commit resources for evaluation programs at the district level, while offering teachers and administrators in the schools the flexibility and autonomy they need to deliver instruction to their students.

Here in the Detroit area, enlightened employers understand how good labor relations and collective bargaining can be a mechanism for improving quality, and how system-wide agreements in industries such as auto can offer management and employees the opportunity to solve problems and make progress at the local level.

Most of all, you understand how skilled and dedicated Americans can see and shape the future. Sixty years ago, on the eve of World War II, when he sketched out his plan for "500 planes a day," Walter Reuther said: "Time, every moment of it precious,...will not permit us to wait." Today, at the start of a new decade where we must prepare over 200,000 first-class teachers a year, time is just as precious, delay is just as dangerous, and, once again, we dare not fail.

Thank you.