

Letters

**Standards for Students
Is Not a Liberal Plot**

In your Feb. 7 editorial "Whose Standards Agenda?" you worry that the president's call for a voluntary national test of fourth graders in reading and eighth graders in math is really a plot to enact "long-standing liberal spending-equalization goals." Let me try to lessen your palpable sense of agitation on this matter.

Spending equalization is an important matter that is treated by state legislatures and state courts. You mistakenly conflate legal issues surrounding spending equalization with a broader discussion of what educational resources are available to a student. The statement I signed in 1992, and which you discussed, referred to educational resources that will enable every student to learn to high standards. It is indeed a "cruel hoax" if a student does not have a well-trained and well-qualified teacher, a safe and orderly learning environment, and access to technology that can be an effective learning tool.

If we stick to the issue of improving our schools, there are only three relevant questions: 1) Do you support higher standards? 2) Do you think all children should learn to those standards? And 3) Do you believe that all children should have a well-prepared teacher and a safe orderly environment? If you answer yes to those questions, we are in complete agreement.

By the way, while you did not mean it to be a compliment, I took your mention of me in the same sentence as Donna Shalala and Marian Wright Edelman to be high praise, indeed.

MARSHALL S. SMITH

Acting Deputy Secretary of Education
Washington

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OUR TURN

AID

**Riley right in call
to get rid of excuses**

U.S. Education Secretary Richard W. Riley is not alone in his frustration with schools that perpetually fail.

He likely will find ready soldiers, perhaps even among teachers' unions, in waging a battle throughout the nation to clean house at schools with high dropout rates where students do not learn.

Riley made the call last week during his annual speech on the state of education, when he challenged communities to improve the quality of schools and teachers, the Washington Post reported.

"If a principal is slow to get the message, find strength in new leaders," Riley said. "If teachers are burned out, counsel them to improve or leave the profession. If laws need to be changed, get on with it."

The battle would be more easily won with increased cooperation from teachers' unions. They now appear ready to help. That hasn't always been the case.

"Too often, (the National Education Association) has sat on the sidelines of change, nay-saying, quick to say what won't work and slow to say

Teachers' unions must be part of the answer, not part of the problem in schools.

what will," NEA President Bob Chase recently said in a speech to the National Press Club in Washington.

"The fact is that, in some instances, we have used our power to block uncomfortable changes, to protect the narrow interest of our members, and not to advance the interests of students and schools."

Such an attitude will be crucial for the kind of overhaul Riley envisions. That's especially so because officials say some of the necessary changes might include revising union contracts with teachers, a complication that traditionally might have brought the wrath of teacher groups.

For Riley, the goal of such cooperation is simple and should be clear to others.

"We need to stop making excuses and get on with the business of fixing our schools."

*Albert Shanker's passing is a reminder of the need
to break molds in order to strengthen institutions*

Teacher Unions: a Key to School Reform

By Charles Taylor Kerchner,
Joseph G. Weeres,
and Julia E. Koppich

AL SHANKER didn't invent teacher unionism, but for more than a quarter-century he was its personification.

He played the game at the edge. In the 1960s he organized New York's teachers, transforming them from a teachers' guild so weak that its newsletter was delivered in anonymous plain envelopes into the United Federation of Teachers, the nation's largest union local. By the turn of the '70s he was the most militant of labor leaders, jailed twice for leading unlawful strikes, spreading fear and in some cases loathing throughout the land.

Ironically, it was the fear of Mr. Shanker that helped push the National Education Association toward collective bargaining, thus spreading teacher unionism around the country. By 1973 he was to earn a footnote in cinema history. In the Woody Allen film "Sleepers," the title character reawakens in 2173 to say that civilization ended because "a man named Albert Shanker got hold of a nuclear warhead."

Public education crisis

His public persona changed. Early on, Shanker realized that teachers couldn't be strong when education was weak. When New York City went broke in 1975, the UFT pledged \$150 million in pension funds to bail out the city. In 1983, when the commission report "A Nation at Risk" criticized public education for permitting a "rising tide of mediocrity," Shanker used the opportunity to remold the union. He turned toward engaging the American Federation of Teachers in educational reform instead of confrontation.

When asked why, Shanker responded with disarming pragmatism that any union leader who had just seen his membership decline by 20 percent would think about doing things differently.

But the point is that most union leaders wouldn't and don't. Typically, unions last only until here is a change in the underlying institution or its production technology.

Thus, Al Shanker's passing is made all the more poignant by its timing. Public education as an institution is arguably entering what Shanker himself called "its first real crisis." The political leavage line is no longer between those who think public ed-

ucation is doing a good job and those who think it is not. The line separates those who think the institution is capable of educating America's children and those who think it is not. Unionized teachers are no stronger than the institution they inhabit.

At least some teacher unionists have come to realize this. Over the last decade a quiet but concerted effort has taken place to transform teacher unions from their industrial-era ideological base. The latest manifestation of this came when National Education Association president Bob Chase called for his union to move from organizing around what Samuel Gompers called "more" to organizing around "better."

Mr. Chase is right about that – and so was Shanker in his call for unionists to rally behind the cause of higher standards – but the real challenge is over when and how this gets done. Politically vexing as it is, establishing high national standards is not the hard part of educational reform. The hard part is getting more than the top 15 percent of students to achieve those standards. No amount of political exhortation will make it happen. Organizing teaching will.

In our recent book "United Mind Workers" (Jossey-Bass) we call for a teacher unionism aligned with the emerging imperatives about learning. The cognitive revolution, which is reflected in the new standards and tests, is changing our definition of what it means to be smart. And what has been called "the third industrial revolution" has changed what graduates need to know to make a middle-class wage. Teachers are the key to this transformation.

A plan for change

Teacher unions, through collective bargaining, organized what we call the first half of teaching – their wages and working conditions. Now, they can finish the job by organizing the actual work of teaching. In the process, they can play a valuable part in reorganizing the institution of public education by:

• Organizing around quality.

This nation is now engaged in a furious debate about learning standards: how we should measure them, what kinds of rewards or consequences should be attached to meeting or failing to meet them. Union leaders have been involved in these debates, but they remain abstractions to

most of the country's 2.5 million public school teachers. Unions need to internalize both the debate and emerging standards. They need to back standards with adequate training, professional development, and a strong peer review system. Peer review requires teachers to define good teaching, to develop ways of communicating it to others, to measure and support it. Ultimately it

Unions need to back national standards with adequate training, professional development, and a strong peer review system.

requires that teachers make decisions about other colleagues, removing those who can't perform.

• **Organizing around individual schools.** By changing the nature and scope of labor agreements, most union critics seek to narrow the scope of bargaining to keep teachers' hands away from public policy. We argue the opposite. Teachers ought to be forced to deal with the question of resource allocation tied to student achievement. This can happen if we slim down district-level contracts and create workplace compacts at individual schools about resources, work rules, and decisionmaking procedures. Why shouldn't the labor agreements that divide most of a school's resources also be its guiding path for educational achievement?

• Organizing around a teacher labor market.

Industrial unions organized around jobs, but there is an older union tradition that organized around occupations, one that allowed members to switch jobs and change the nature of their work relatively easily. In a time when education itself is in great flux, it makes sense to organize teaching as a career rather than a single job, to anticipate the role technology is likely to play in teaching, and to organize a career ladder that allows people to enter as helpers or aides and advance to become full-fledged teachers.

We're not sure whether Al Shanker liked the sweep of our ideas or not, or even our point of departure. His last campaign centered on standards for learning and student conduct. But Shanker

was committed to strengthening public education as the cornerstone of democracy and making strong unions both the fruit and the bulwark of that great experiment. He also saw a desperate urgency to get on with the task.

A historic transformation

We believe public education faces a transformation as profound as that which took place during the Progressive Era of the early 1900s, when the country transformed from being organized around farms and villages and became a nation of cities and factories. An institutional change of such magnitude spells real danger – and real opportunity – for teacher unions.

The debate about how the unions should respond is just beginning. Al Shanker believed passionately in the power of the intellect and in the value of debate. His voice will be missed.

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Real hope in scholarship proposal

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CHICAGO —President Clinton's announcement of the proposed Hope Scholarship plan is one of the most significant pieces of educational legislation since the GI Bill.

That bill, which enabled hundreds of thousands of Americans to advance their education, laid the foundation for a whole generation of Americans to enter into the middle class. Now that same middle class is being threatened with a system of higher education whose costs have far outdistanced most families' ability to pay.

The most significant feature of the president's proposal is that a working family would be able to receive a \$1,500 tax credit toward the education of a family member or a dependent for two years upon maintaining a "B" grade point average. This is a splendid concept.

First, it is a tax credit—in other words, a dollar-for-dollar return on each dollar the family invests. This will be a real benefit and incentive for the middle class to participate and directly encourages an individual to invest in himself/herself.

The second most important feature is that it places a substantial responsibility on the individual. Asking the student to maintain a "B" average will require a seriousness of mind so that the student will not take its benefit lightly. The proposal juxtaposes benefit with responsibility, opportunity with academic rigor. These are virtues that too often have been lost in our educational debates and deserve the reinforcement this program will provide.

I am further convinced that this proposal will pay for itself many times over. The GI Bill exponentially increased the size of the middle

class, producing a world-class work force that paid taxes that financed our nation's growth and prosperity. The Hope Scholarship Plan has the potential to exert similar influence. It will provide a far greater return than our initial investment.

As chancellor of the City Colleges of Chicago, the second largest community college system in the nation, serving almost 200,000 students, I am very much aware of the importance of this proposed legislation and its potential impact on a city such as Chicago. We have literally thousands of young, and not so young, people walking the streets whose family income is too high to receive financial aid but who have too little discretionary income to afford to set aside any savings for post-secondary education.

The majority of jobs that will be created between now and 2010 will require some form of post-secondary education. More so than ever, education has become a lifelong experience. Our ability to maintain our competitive edge as a nation can be lost if we do not position this generation of Americans to take advantage of every opportunity possible.

The Hope Scholarship program can be implemented without creating a new federal bureaucracy and incurring major new administrative costs. Just for once, let us move this issue off the agenda of partisan political debate and critique the idea on a non-partisan basis—on its merits. Americans are asking our political leaders to do what's good for America. President Clinton's Hope Scholarship proposal is the type of idea that should go forward with all of us united.

Ronald J. Temple

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Teachers' union fights for good teachers

By BARBARA DIAMOND

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Over the past few weeks, I've read several editorials and articles in The Oregonian arguing that the Oregon Education Association has gotten too powerful. The Oregonian seems to favor the view that the OEA does nothing but try to save the jobs of bad teachers. The image presented by The Oregonian is that of a power-hungry organization that cares nothing about the good of students or of the community.

I have been doing legal cases for the OEA as an attorney in private practice for more than 10 years. Here are some representative cases the OEA has paid me to handle:

- A few years ago, there were special education students in a metro school district who were made to go to school in an outbuilding with no insulation or proper facilities.

- When a special education teacher sided with her students against district administration at a Department of Education hearing, she was retaliated against by her administrators with a bad evaluation.

- The OEA paid me to help the teacher get her record cleared.

- A male teacher in a Southern Oregon district was denied a transfer to the local high

school, the job he sought for years, because of his gender. The OEA paid me to fight his case in arbitration.

The arbitrator ruled that the teacher was a victim of sex discrimination. The teacher got his transfer.

- A teacher was denied the right to use her paid personal leave for a religious holiday. The OEA paid me to fight her case of religious discrimination.

- A custodian in a small district helped her co-workers organize for stronger union protection. After an election brought in the OEA affiliate, the custodian had her work hours suddenly reduced. The administration said she lost the hours "for budget reasons."

The OEA paid me to file an unfair labor practice to win the custodian her rights back. We won the case.

In each of these cases, I felt good about the work I was doing. I felt that I was working in the public interest, the type of work few lawyers ever get to do.

School administrators and school boards are made up of people, people who sometimes make mistakes that the legal system can rectify. My job has been to make sure school districts act solely within the bounds of the law.

But The Oregonian never reports about this work. In all my years, not a single case I have handled for the OEA has ever been covered by The Oregonian.

For many years, I have been happy about the lack of publicity about my cases. I never saw any need for The Oregonian to publish articles about the cases I won. Most labor relations matters were never deemed newsworthy, whether the union or management won.

But now, there is a spotlight on the OEA. The Oregonian has now decided that the OEA's work is worthy of coverage. Unfortunately, this new interest in the OEA presents a slanted picture. Now The Oregonian's silence on what we actually do approaches the level of misrepresentation.

Another case in point: I have been reviewing school district teacher dismissals for over 10 years. When I am asked to review a case of a teacher who is floundering in the classroom, I look to see if district administrators have made a reasonable effort to help the teacher improve and if all laws were obeyed.

In cases where this has occurred, my normal practice is to help the teacher resign with dignity. But these dozens of cases over the years are not newspaper material. Only the extremely rare case of teacher misconduct captures The Oregonian headlines.