Testimony before the House Education Committee on House Bill 2466, April 9, 1985. Portland, Oregon

Mr. Chairperson and members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the important issues of teacher testing and teacher training.

I am Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, which represents over 610,000 education employees nationwide. The AFT has a keen interest in the issue of education reform, and we have been recognized widely as a leader in this movement. We were the first organization to support teacher testing and have recently advocated a national exam designed to ensure that the incoming teacher force is of the highest quality. As I will also discuss later, one of our affiliates, the Toledo Federation of Teachers, has developed an innovative teacher internship and assistance program that has been judged one of the most effective such systems in the nation.

The question before you -- the question of teacher quality -- is undoubtedly the most important issue in the total picture of education reform. Without capable teachers, no program of education reform, no matter how well-conceived, can succeed. Reformers in the past tried to circumvent this issue by "teacher-proofing" their innovations. Today, it is state legislatures that are trying to "teacher-proof" or "fool-proof" their reforms by prescribing all aspects of education and issuing detailed rules and regulation for teachers to follow. "Teacher-proofing" didn't work in the past, and it can't work now. There is simply no way of getting around the issue of attracting and maintaining a high-quality teaching force.

Do we currently have such a teaching force? My own view, and it is supported by research evidence, is that we do. To be sure, there are some people teaching who shouldn't be, just as there are some incompetents in every occupation. But American education is still benefiting from the fact that for most of our history talented women and minorities who wanted to enter a profession had few places to go besides teaching. And we are still benefiting from the fact that many capable young men facing the draft decided they would rather do battle in the schools than in Vietnam. What all that means, then, is that we currently have in the nation's classrooms among the best and brightest teachers we are likely to see for a long time.

Times have changed, though. The conditions that enabled us to have a steady supply of able teachers no longer exist. The highly capable women and minorities who entered teaching because other professions were closed to them, the people who tolerated low pay and poor working conditions either because of an extraordinary calling or because their salaries were supplemented by spouses -- these people are at or near retirement age. Other teachers are simply leaving the profession. It is reported that, nationwide, 15% of first-year teachers leave; by the end of seven years, 50% of those initially employed have left the profession. Just to bring the point home, I understand that your own state Superintendent of Education, Verne Duncan, reported that Oregon loses 25% of its teachers after their first year on the job. It is important to recognize, too, that the teachers who leave

do not represent a random group, but rather the highest-achieving members of the profession, as measured by standardized tests.

Who are the teachers who will be replacing these retirees? Who are the teachers who will be stepping in to replace those who leave after one or five or seven years? It's a depressing picture, and a recent Rand Corporation study summarized it well: "new recruits to teaching are less academically qualified than those who are leaving; moreover, the number of new entrants is insufficient to meet the coming demand."

While we all know and worry about the current shortages of math and science teachers, we neglect the fact that in a few years there will be nationwide a staggering teacher shortage crisis that will affect virtually every subject area and level of education. While we often hear horror stories about the one or two incompetent teachers we've met, we rarely see the same alarm and action over the fact that college-bound seniors who indicate they will enter teaching represent the bottom group of SAT scorers, that the test scores of potential teachers have dropped more sharply than those of other students.

The problem, by the way, is not merely "elsewhere." According to the University of Oregon, your state, too, will soon be in the throes of a teacher shortage crisis. That means, among other things, that Oregon will have to look for good teachers not only from its own fine schools but also from other states. (A case in point has just occurred. Can anyone ever have imagined that Texas, where collective bargaining is illegal, would one day recruit striking Mississippi teachers for its own understaffed schools?)

We face, then, a future in which there will be an inadequate supply of teachers and few in this pool will be as able as past teachers. We face a future in which talented individuals will look at the poor pay, poor working conditions, low status, and lack of professionalism in teaching and say, "this is not a field I wish to enter." And we may today promulgate and implement reforms in standards or in curriculum all we like, it will all be for naught without a qualified teaching force.

The crisis is not hopeless. But what do states typically do when there's a teacher shortage? They lower standards. It has happened before, and it is threatening to happen again. It is the last thing we need to do. In fields like medicine, if there is a shortage of doctors, you do not find states or hospitals giving anyone a substitute emergency medical license to go out and practice. And it's not done in law or dentistry or in any other field.

When our state and local education agencies are faced with the usual tough choices between quantity and quality as the shortage emerges, they could do the equivalent of what most other professions would do, and do indeed do. That is, after the children come to school and after each teacher's class is full, they could turn to the remaining students and parents and say, "sorry, there is a shortage of teachers, and those of you who could not be accommodated this semester will be given the first opportunity to take the first grade next semester or next year." The schools won't do that. There is a custodial function to schools, and there is no place in the country where the children will be sent home. They will be permitted to enter.

If those standards are dropped even lower than they now are, Oregon and the other states will be employing for the next generations a cadre of unqualified teachers. Furthermore, dropping the standards will hasten the departure of the hundreds of thousands of fine teachers already in the system who are sacrificing a great deal for the children they teach and who have to work under conditions which they find stressful and sometimes even demeaning. They do not wish to work with incompetent colleagues and be tarred by the same brush.

It doesn't have to happen that way. And judging from the intent of HB 2466, Oregon is taking steps to ensure that the grim future I and others have outlined does not materialize.

In our judgment, one of the keys to attracting a quality teaching force is a rigorous testing program. Of course, no measure to attract talented teacher candidates will work without substantial salary increases and improvements in working conditions. That is a simple economic fact of life, and it must be faced. We no longer have the conditions that enabled us to get teachers on the cheap. But I wish to focus here on entry standards, for high salaries alone will not solve the quality problem.

The testing program suggested in HB 2466 is a good start. You no doubt know that I have proposed a new, tough, national (not federal) teacher exam, which includes an internship. But that is a few years' away, and the problems we are discussing are upon us now. It is therefore appropriate, and desirable, for the State of Oregon to implement a test now as a condition of certification. I commend you for the effort.

The issue of testing teachers remains controversial. There are those who say that there is no relationship between test performance and performance as a teacher. I agree that passing a math test will tell us little about whether or not someone will be a good math teacher. But I will also emphatically state that if a math teacher can't pass a math test, or can't read or write at a high level, that person should not be in the classroom. The best personality in the world and the highest dedication to children cannot compensate for ignorance. The public demands as much, and is owed that. And I assure you that without a strong signal that we are serious about getting able people into the nation's classrooms, the public will not support public education. I can also assure you that without able teachers, we will not have well-educated children. Do not, then, be persuaded by the shibboleth that passing tests does not predict teacher effectiveness. Remember, instead, that the inability to pass a test is a clear indication that a teacher has not mastered what he or she will be teaching -- and that this teacher will be ineffective.

There is evidence beginning to surface, also, that testing does have a positive impact on the number and ability of teacher candidates. At a conference on testing held here in Oregon, Mr. Dick Peterson of ETS reported that in California, where a teacher test has been in use for three years, officials report more applicants and more highly-qualified candidates than there were before. (I'm sure it is not insignificant that California also has substantially raised teachers' salaries.) It is also important to say here that the people who tend to go into teaching in the first place are caring and dedicated. Consider the benefits, then, to the profession

and to education when the public also knows that teachers are capable, demonstrably capable, and like other professionals are required to take and pass a meaningful test.

We are also very mindful of the adverse impact tests have had on minority teacher candidates in other states. It is a serious issue, and an indictment of the quality of education and teacher training that large numbers of minorities -- and others -- have received. And, as I noted before, talented minorities who once would have entered teaching now have more high-paying, attractive professional options; the pool of candidates among minorities, as among non-minorities, has changed because of the availability of alernatives where none before existed.

But we would not advocate having no standards because some people can't meet them. We believe that this is a racist stance that would cover-up educational deficiencies and excuse us from correcting them. It is also a stance that is particularly injurious to minority children, who will soon comprise the majority of public-school students, certainly in our urban areas. The noted black columnist, William Raspberry, made the point well in a recent Washington Post article:

> Some of the blacks in the debate believe that standardized tests are intrinsically racist, and that they do not truly measure competency. Others, including a growing number of black school administrators, say that while they are distressed at the disproportionate racial impact of the tests, the real problem is not the tests but the preparation of the prospective teachers. In any case, they argue, it's unrealistic to expect black children to learn to pass the tests that will get them into quality colleges and decent jobs if their teachers can't pass such tests.

We therefore urge that any test adopted be free of cultural bias, that special help be given to candidates who seek it, and that perhaps in the first few years of test administration, opportunities be given to those who fail the test to get help and retake the test. We have also made proposals elsewhere for programs to identify talented minority youngsters and encourage them to enter teaching. But of course, the best prospect for ensuring an adequate and qualified supply of minority candidates is to improve education and upgrade teaching as a profession. Additional evidence for that point is found in the fact that in those states that instituted an entry-level test for teachers, along with other education reforms, pass rates for minority candidates steadily began to rise after initial testing.

To say, then, that minorities can't pass tests is to engage in a pernicious, sugar-coated racism. They can, they do, and they will continue to do so in greater numbers as we improve the quality of education they receive and engage in the necessary affirmative steps along the way. By way of example, let me note that we do not hear anyone from the minority or non-minority community saying that black doctors or lawyers should not or cannot take the tests for those professions or that tests for those professions should be scuttled altogether. Let us not create a double standard for the teaching profession; and let us certainly not create a segregated, unequal system for judging the qualifications of teachers.

We would also urge that the State ensure the availability of enough high-quality subject-matter tests -- or a defensible alternative -- for every teaching area before implementing the new testing requirement. The state of Florida, for example, in its recent preparation for a career ladder program, discovered a lack of tests in certain subjects too late to avoid damage to that plan and to the progress of their education reform initiative as a whole. We do not anticipate such extensive problems in Oregon's case, but we believe it would be wise to be ready at every level, ensuring both fairness and teacher support.

Let me now turn to the provision in HB 2466 for establishing an internship for beginning teachers. It is an excellent policy. I spoke earlier about the high defections from the teaching ranks after the first year and the significant talent drain this represents. Teaching is probably the only profession in which what you're expected to do the first year is the same as the last year of your career. The first year for teachers, it seems, is a little like trying to win a world war singlehandedly. There is little or no preparation for real-life classrooms, and there is virtaully no help from administrators, who construe such pleas as admissions of weakness on the part of the new teacher. There is no comparable experience in any other profession or occupation.

The AFT believes, and experience has shown, that many of the problems faced by beginning teachers, and by education as a whole, can be alleviated by the institution of a well-designed intern program. It should not be imposed on teachers; rather, teachers should participate in its design and function. If it becomes a bureaucratic exercise, it will fail. If time, thought, and resources are devoted to it, it will succeed.

A few efforts have been made to meet first-year teachers' needs, and one of the best in the nation is the Toledo plan, which was initiated by the AFT local in that city. The reason this plan succeeds, according to a Rand Corporation study of teacher evaluation nationwide, is because it uses classroom teachers to work with the new teacher in developing sound teaching skills and bridging the gap between theory and practice. It is a tough program and some new teachers don't make it. But it is invaluable in creating good teachers, improving the skills of assisting teachers, and raising the professional ethos and collegiality of the schools. Anyone interested in such a program would do well to consult the Rand report.

Also essential to a successful internship program is the assurance of full employment that first year. The new teacher does not need to face both the complexities of a first year with meetings, new forms to fill out, papers to grade, parent conferences to prepare, the stress of managing a class of thirty children successfully, and an inadequate year's wage. Assisting teachers must also be released from some duties for this program. State funding to ensure that the monies are there for both large and small districts will make it possible for all districts to have the program, equalizing the situation, and will prevent additional stress on already-stretched district budgets.

Further, we believe that an intern program should not be instituted in lieu of student teaching and an even earlier hands-on experience, for they are vital to the teacher training process. To wait until internship before providing that the student see the relationship between educational

theory and classroom practice would be, in our opinion, profoundly counterprodocutive. It would be a little like teaching first-graders the nature of a sentence and then waiting until they were high-school seniors before letting them write one. These practical experiences should be retained.

The AFT agrees with the proposal that interns should receive full salary as beginning teachers, and that cost for intern supervision be borne by the state. We recommend that the monies be clearly in addition to the state support already established for districts, so that existing programs will not be robbed in order to finance another. Internship must be a step forward, not backward. Districts need more funds for what they presently have, and the whole of our system would suffer if present funds were expected to be stretched even farther than they are now. In fact, we believe that in all cases where reforms need funding to ensure their success, new funding needs to be secured before reforms are set in place. We would like to emphasize here our belief that the intern program should be considered a highest priority for funding at the state level, and that few proposals for education reform in Oregon will do so much for the future of Oregon education as this one.

We wish also to comment on the proposal for professional growth plans for teachers. Continuing education is important for the development of quality professionals, and important to both beginning and veteran teachers. Care therefore should be taken that these plans and available offerings reflect and meet the needs of staffs and that they relate to an educational rather than a bureaucratic process.

For example, there is now a growing body of research available on effective teaching practices, grouping, classroom management, teacher expectations, learning styles and the like. In effect, there finally exists the foundation for a validated science of teaching. Yet the majority of teachers, and perhaps even teacher educators, are not trained in how to interpret and apply the findings of such research. As a result, far too much of the "technology of teaching" sits on shelves in libraries and research institutions. Teachers and teacher educators, we believe, should have deep knowledge of how to apply research techniques in pursuing learning problems, the opportunity to apply these skills at the preservice and inservice levels, and access to a regular process for keeping them up-to-date on the latest educational research findings.

A case in point is the American Federation of Teachers' experience with our Education Research and Dissemination program. In the last two years, 38 cities have participated in an inservice program designed for teachers to train other teachers in the practical applications of research findings in areas such as classroom management. The University of Oregon has experimented with a less widescale but similar program. Both experiments have proven successful.

It is perhaps appropriate at this point to emphasize the need to upgrade our institutions of teacher education. It is a critical undertaking, for many such schools have not availed themselves of the soundest thinking on pedagogy. There is much need for change, and time does not permit dwelling on it. We cannot do this, however, by slashing funding for higher education. Western Oregon State College, formerly the Oregon College of

Education, whose faculty are represented by AFT, was once the premier teacher education institution in the Pacific Northwest. Effective at the beginning of the last academic year, 16 full-time faculty were laid off, several of them tenured professors. That is not the way to improve teacher education.

In regard to the bill's proposal for reciprocity, our affiliates here in Oregon have supported the concept since the Oregon Teachers Standards and Practices Commission first proposed it. We continue to support reciprocity, as proposed in this bill. Particularly in a time of teacher shortages and with the limitations on small school districts, Oregon will want to be able to find capable candidates for its classrooms.

Finally, I would like to address our concerns with that portion of the bill which deals with an experimental program of non-traditional certification. The bill would allow development of an experimental program to provide basic teaching certificates to a limited number of applicants who have not graduated from approved teacher education programs.

If this program is adopted, we are making the assumption that those areas of studies conducted at a teacher education institution are not necessary to becoming an effective teacher. While we understand, and support the idea, that existing institutions of teacher training need major improvements, we cannot agree that no formal teacher training is necessary. It is simply not true that any educated person can teach. And, as we stated earlier, there now exists a substantial body of research upon which new foundations to improve teacher training can be built. Teachers must know, and should know, that body of research and its application. That is far more than a simple matter of on-the-job training. Universities remain the best places to acquire that training. To propose to dilute the quality of teachers and teaching by saying, in effect, that anyone can teach is to exacerbate the very problems you are trying to overcome. We need, now more than ever, high quality programs of teacher preparation. We would, of course, support intensive courses and flexible hours and locations coupled with internships to allow people with degrees in subject areas but with no formal training to develop the skills necessary to become effective and productive teachers. But to abandon professional education is a grave mistake.

In conclusion, I would like to point out to the committee a vast resource for effective teachers that we believe has not even begun to be tapped effectively. In this state and across the nation, AFT represents thousands of paraprofessionals, often referred to in Oregon as teacher or classroom aides. These are people who have been "in the trenches" for years and have become part of the educational team. In Portland, our local affiliate, the Portland Federation of Teachers, worked with the Portland Public Schools and the city's CETA program a few years ago to provide access to funds to paraprofessionals to complete the needed requirements for teacher certification. Establishing such a career ladder for classroom aides could certainly help alleviate the teacher shortage problem and promote quality personnel at the same time. The creative employment of paraprofessionals has not been explored fully, and we would urge you to consider them a valuable resource in the education reform movement.

I would be happy to address any issues raised in my talk or to address other issues of concern to the members of the Committee. Again, let me thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.