

FINAL

# The Case for Radical School Reform

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**Introduction, Alan K. Campbell, Vice-Chairman, ARA Services, Inc.**

I am genuinely delighted to have the opportunity of introducing Al Shanker to you. I know that for the great majority of you, Al Shanker needs no introduction, but he really deserves one in relation to all he has done in the past six to ten years in the area of education reform. I have had the absolutely wonderful opportunity of working with him on a variety of national commissions and study groups, such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. It has been a great learning experience for me and I have also been able to observe what I believe is the single most important thing about the contributions that Al has made to education reform. That is, not only has he brought to it tremendous intellectual contributions, but he has made it credible to the teachers of this country. Without that credibility, there is no way that we would be making the kind of progress that I believe, in some parts of the country, we are indeed beginning to make.

I will not take time to talk about the various and significant kinds of changes that Al has been advocating, but I will make the point that he is championing fundamental changes in the very way education services are provided in this country. These are not changes that will divide you, but are fundamental to the whole system of how such services should be provided and delivered. He brings to that a kind of passion related to his belief -- and I think those who have looked at the issue share this belief -- the education reform is fundamental to the future of the United States.

We don't really have a central city education problem, we have an education problem that relates to our total education system. One doesn't need to cite many numbers to find out that our best students are about as good as the average student in Japan and British Columbia and in other nations of the world. This is not an issue that is restricted to what people may have talked about as the difficulties related to central cities, but is a problem with the total education system. I don't think anyone has pointed that out more forcefully than Al Shanker has.

Al Shanker is, as you know, the President of the American Federation of Teachers. He has been a significant union leader in the education world for many years and has brought to that leadership position a kind of public responsibility which is demonstrated by his alliance with other forces in society that are simultaneously wishing for education reform. Brad Butler, the retired chairman of Procter and Gamble and chairman of a CED committee on education, and Al Shanker, a member of that CED task force, have traveled across the country together making speeches to both the business world and to the education world stating their belief that unless the United States deals with this problem, we clearly will begin -- not begin -- we will continue to fall behind the rest of the industrialized world in our general competitiveness, which certainly is one of the major issues related to education reform. Al plays the role on the international scene where he is involved in

the international union movement of teachers. He is off, in a few days, to Hungary where he will be involved in a meeting of that group. He is going to spend some time in Czechoslovakia, he has already been to Poland and does that as a leader of one of the most significant free-world teachers' union movements that there is.

It has been a great pleasure for me to work with Al over the last half-dozen years. And, I think, we are unusually privileged to have the opportunity of hearing him tonight. I would only add further that in addition to his many professional accomplishments, Al is known among his friends for his outstanding culinary abilities in the kitchen. He is also a wine connoisseur and he also takes good care of his garden. There can't be anything wrong with a guy like that. Al Shanker (applause).

### **The Case for Radical School Reform, Albert Shanker**

Thank you very much, Scottie. It is a pleasure to be here and it has also been a pleasure to work with you, both on the CED and the National Board and many other places. I think the one greatest sign of hope for our schools is the fact that so many groups that might usually be at odds with each other are working together.

I don't usually do this, that is at this time of day. There is a story that Ronald Reagan used to tell about Caesar bringing all of his friends to the Coliseum for one of the traditional shows of lions versus Christians. When the Coliseum was full, the gates were opened and the lions came running out. At one side the Christians, the other the lions. One of Christians jumped up and shouted something toward the lions and the lions just sort of stopped and sat down and did not take a step. Caesar was very angry. He had spent all of this money bringing his friends together and now the evening was ruined. He stood up and asked, "Who is the Christian who jumped up and shouted at the lions?" One of the Christians came forward and said, "I did, Caesar." Caesar asked what he had said that made the lions stop in their tracks. The Christian responded, "Caesar, I told them that there would be speeches after dinner."

If any of you have been around, we are now going into the seventh year that education reform has been a major concern of governors, legislators, the business community and the press. I guess that the reason for this is best illustrated by the story of the Japanese, French and American men who went on a hunting trip together. They had successful hunting for a day or two, and then they were all captured by a tribe and were told that they would be executed. But, before execution, they would have their one last wish fulfilled. The Frenchman said that his one last wish was to sing his national anthem one last time. He was told that would be OK. The Japanese man said that he would like to give his famous speech on quality control one last time. He was told that would be

OK. Then the American's turn came and he requested that he be executed before he had to listen to that speech on quality control.

So, it is clear that while education has other purposes, the motivating force behind our concern in recent years has been our international competitive position, or weakening of it. That is why the first question I get asked is to what extent are all of these reports true? To what extent is it reality or is it just an interesting story? School bashing is easy and bad news is news, good news isn't.

We, as a nation, spend more money on testing students than any other nation in the world yet, when we think about it, we know very little. The usual kind of tests that we give, which tell us that 53 percent of the kids in this country are above average, don't really tell us anything because what is the average? Recently a doctor in West Virginia found that kids in all states were above average. Something called the Lake Wobegon effect. The fact is that "average" doesn't mean what you think it means in these tests. The average is an average which is determined by giving the test to a sample group of youngsters before it is ever commercially marketed. The kids who take it in the real world after that are compared to the average of the score of the sample. The same test is given for about twelve years and as the test is out there, more and more principals and teachers get to see it, kids score higher and higher each year and everybody gets to be above average. But, nevertheless, when its all finished we don't know what kids know.

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It has been around for about twenty years or a little more than that. This is the national sampling assessment where they sample 100,000 to 200,000 youngsters periodically in all of the subjects which you might expect that they assess. So we have a pretty good picture of what it is that American youngsters know.

Two pieces of good news. One piece is that almost nobody in this country is totally illiterate. The second piece is that minorities, while still behind, are catching up very, very fast. When the tests first started, minority seventeen year olds who were still in school were performing in reading and mathematics at about the same level as a white nine year old. This is an eight year disparity. Now, twenty years later, there are many more black and hispanic youngsters still in school. That is, those who used to dropout are now in school and being tested. So you would expect that with the dropouts still in school the scores would go down, but they haven't. Instead, the typical black or hispanic, who is in school at age seventeen, is now functioning at the level of a white thirteen year old. One-half of the gap has been narrowed even though many more minority youngsters go to school. That is very substantial progress. If we made the same progress, twenty years from now

there wouldn't be a gap. Twenty years is a long time, but nevertheless, it shows that there is substantial movement.

Now, that's all the good news there is I am sorry to say. The rest of the story about where we are going is essentially a story which concludes that not only are all of these reports that gave us shocking rhetoric true, but that they were probably understating the case. They were understating. These assessments are assessments of nine, thirteen, and seventeen year old kids.

I am not going to stand here for an hour and go through all of the statistics. I am just going to take one little snapshot, which I think is an important snapshot, and that is about seventeen year olds who are still in school after about 30 percent have dropped out. These are successful youngsters who are not dropouts. We are going to just look at this one little section and I am going to ask the question, "How many of those students who are successfully graduating high school are in the top levels of achievement?"

Now the way the national assessment works is they have certain categories. The bottom category is "illiterate or enumerate" and then there is "a-little-bit-above illiterate or enumerate." Then they have some other categories. Eventually, they reach something they call "adequate" and finally there is a top level of people who are really able to function. My question is, "What percent of the seventeen year olds who graduate, out of all American seventeen year olds -- I am not talking about just minorities, I am talking about all the kids -- what percent of those kids function at the highest level?"

What does "highest level" mean? Well, in reading it means being able to read something like the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*. In writing it means being able to write a good letter or essay with practically no errors and with some good

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content. In mathematics the standard is somewhat lower. The highest standard is a two-step arithmetic problem. Something like, "Mary Jane put \$500 in a bank at 5 percent interest for one year. How much did she take out at the end of that one year?" That's the toughest.

Well, depending whether you are talking about reading, writing, math, science or social studies, the percentage of American youngsters who are still in school -- after 30 percent dropout -- who are able to function at the highest level is 3 percent, 4 percent, 5 percent, or 6 percent. About 3 percent were able to write a good essay. So you might say, "Well, you're being a little fussy. I mean that's a really good letter you're talking about. How about somebody who can just write a letter applying for a job to the manager of a local supermarket. One or two paragraphs, maybe a few spelling errors or grammatical errors, but you can read it, you can understand it. But, at least

they have an idea

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they have got something in there that tries to convince you. What percentage can do that?" Only 20 percent of those graduating are able to write a one or two paragraph letter which contains a single persuasive idea. 80 percent cannot.

I want to emphasize that these are the figures for all of America and, as a matter of fact, they disproportionately represent areas that are not urban. This is because in urban areas you've got dropout rates like 40 percent, 50 percent or 60 percent. While they've dropped out, I am talking about seventeen year olds who are still in school. Now what does this mean?

I guess the first question to ask is, "Well alright, so you've given us some numbers, but maybe God only made 3 percent of us smart enough to write a good letter. How does this compare to other countries?" Well obviously other countries do not give exactly the same examination as we do and, therefore, I cannot stand here and say that on the same exam this is what kids in Germany, Canada, Australia, Great Britain score. However, we can give a fairly accurate comparison because in Germany, for example, no one can get into a university unless they have passed a national examination called the Arbitur. That is, there is a national standard for getting into colleges and universities. The same is true in Great Britain -- there is a national standard. In Canada there are provincial standards. That is, they do not have the American system where each college or university sets its own standards. There are essentially provincial standards or national standards and therefore, it is possible to take a look at the Arbitur or the British ~~A~~ levels or their general examinations or Canadian exams. We can take a look and say, "Well, what percentage of kids go to college in those countries and would those youngsters who pass that examination be in our top group?"

When you look at those stats there is no question about it. The Arbitur in Germany is five days of essays, writing, history, literature, problem solving, and mathematics, chemistry and physics and so forth. We can be absolutely certain that anyone who passes the Arbitur would certainly be in our top 2 percent or 3 percent. 28 percent of the kids in Germany pass that examination. Overall, the percentage of kids in other industrial countries who pass the examinations is 16 percent. France is about 21 percent. So we are essentially producing 3 percent in comparison to the 16 percent to 28 percent or more in other countries at that top level.

There are some conclusions that one can draw from this. For example, you can conclude that practically every kid that gets into a college or university in Germany meets the standards for Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Stanford or other elite institutions in the United States. I guess

just  
UK 16%  
LA 23  
FR 21%

another conclusion you can draw is that 95 percent of the kids who go to college in the United States would not be admitted to a college or university anywhere else in the industrial world. Which is another way of saying that a good deal of the satisfaction that exists in this country where people say, "Well the problem is New York, it's Philadelphia, it's Chicago. Sure, these kids have special problems we've got to try and do something about it. But, basically the rest of the country is OK. The problems are the urban areas, the minorities and poor kids." The only reason that we believe the rest of the country is OK is because our standards in higher education have been so flexible and so adjusted that lots of parents are made to be very happy. After all my kids are going to college. They don't ask what entry into college means.

Two weeks ago I was down in Tampa, Florida talking to a group of AFT members. I was trying to convince them how important this situation is and how tough it would be to turn the situation around. I was getting a lot of questions and people didn't like to accept this. Then in came somebody with a copy of the Tampa newspaper, front page, second section, April 8th, which essentially said if you were turned down by the college of your first choice don't worry because there is a college somewhere in the United States that will take you. No matter what you did in high-school. That's what it said and it was full-page and it was documented by saying well here's one model and here is another, but it said, essentially, that everyone could go to college.

Another implication of this is that in Germany every teacher has been admitted to college by meeting these standards and has graduated from that sort of college. Therefore, every teacher in Germany has met standards that would have admitted them to an elite institution in the United States. I went to Germany and spoke to my colleagues and asked them, "What percentage of your elementary school teachers are uncomfortable with arithmetic or science?" They looked at me and asked if this was the beginning of a joke. They don't understand. In the United States when a state like California or Florida puts an examination in place for prospective elementary school teachers, the test which they give in mathematics is a sixth grade arithmetic test and the passing score for teachers is the same 65 percent that it would be for the sixth grade kids. 30 percent to 40 percent of the prospective teachers fail the examination. Some of them are hired anyway, but even when they stick to the standard many of them are hired because they passed -- they got a 65 percent. There is no other industrialized country in the world that has this problem.

This is not something you can solve instantly. You cannot fire all of these teachers tomorrow because you have no replacements. You have nobody who knows any more arithmetic waiting for these jobs. So we have got a real problem. This is not a simple one where the union will stand there and talk about being loyal to the people who are there now. It's a real problem. By our

standards, you don't really need any mathematics or science to graduate high school, you don't need any to get into college, you don't need any to graduate from college.

The result is you have teachers who don't know mathematics or science. These international results are largely due to the fact that you are likely to have every other elementary school teacher who doesn't know these subjects and feels uncomfortable with them. The kids are not only losing the year, but are getting a certain attitude. That is, many teachers are in effect saying, "Look kids, I became a teacher and graduated college and I don't know these things and I work."

I don't think that many of the reports that have come out have put figures like that on the table. They are available, they are public. Please write to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. They are located in Princeton at the Educational Testing Services. They put out report cards -- it's government funded so they don't want to seem to be political so they are not written in an original or exciting way -- but all of the stuff is there, including what they consider to be a good essay or a poor essay or whatever. Anyway, it's all there so go look at it.

Well, what will we do with this? The first thing that we need to realize is that the problem is not only an urban problem. It's bigger and it's tougher. There are problems in addition to education in urban areas and I am not arguing for neglect of urban areas, but I am here to say that it is not an urban problem alone. We have an American problem and it is part of the richest, wealthiest kids. Some of the kids that have some of the greatest advantages that any kid ever had are not learning very much in school. It is not surprising when a kid who comes out of a neighborhood where there are drugs, discrimination, poor health-care, poverty and all sorts of other problems does not do well. It very is shocking when you get kids who have everything, who should do well, but are nowhere near the standards that are out there today.

Let me add one little footnote: the standards are about to change. The Europeans are very worried that each country is not going to be competitive. The kinds of meetings that business people have had in this country for the last six or seven years are starting to take place in Europe. They feel that their systems are not good enough, even though they are way ahead of where we are now. I will also note that I have not talked about Japan, Singapore or Korea, but Canada, Germany, Australia and Great Britain, countries that are culturally more like us. That is, countries where the mother doesn't spend all of her time going to school, getting the same books and educating the child.

What ought we do? The first question we need to ask is, "If these are countries that are doing such a good job, why don't we just copy what they have done?" I will very quickly dispose of that question. Basically, we can't. One reason we can't is that we don't have the same teaching

force. In Germany they can absolutely put a teacher into every classroom who is a crackerjack at language, history, mathematics and science because otherwise the teacher would have never gotten into the university. We may be able to do that 20, 30, or 40 years from now, but we are not going to be able to in the next 5 or 10 or 15 years down the road.

Another difference is that all of these countries accept tracking at a very early age. In the third, fourth, or fifth grade they separate the kids out. Mainly, they are able to do that because it is traditional and they accept it. In the United States this would have a fantastic impact on minorities and new immigrants. Basically, it would be very, very tough to get parents to accept that in the third or fourth grade you are going to separate kids out and tell them what their ultimate chance is going to be in life at that age. We do tracking by draw, by where we live and where we move, but we are not about to accept the official kind of tracking that goes on in other industrialized countries.

There is a way and that is to provide the incentives for the youngsters to work harder. For instance, we could say, "Uh-oh, you can't get into college unless you can pass that examination, the *Arbitur*." We used to have that standard in the United States when my mother told me, "If you don't do better you will not get into college." Those of you who are my age or about will undoubtedly remember that you had experiences that are similar to that. Are we about to adopt college standards in the United States where 90 percent or 95 percent of those who now go to college wouldn't go? It would be politically unacceptable. You might be able to do it one or two percentage points a year, but you certainly could not do it more quickly than that. But competition clearly acts as an incentive in those other countries.

All of this points to the notion that we need to think of something different. We need to think of this for several reasons. First of all, the schools that we have now never worked for most kids. By the way, they don't work for most kids in those other countries. A 28 percent pass rate in a country where all of the support is there, all of the pressures is there is fine. It's a lot better than 2 percent or 3 percent. But what about the others? We basically have an institution, in schools as we know them today, which is a Middle Ages institution. It was created as a voluntary institution. If you had twelve or fourteen kids and you had two of them who seemed to be bookish at the age of six and they were able to sit still and keep quiet, then father would say, "I think I'll send the two of them to school." Not the others because they didn't look like they could make it. We need to think about it. We need to think about schools and why is it that so many don't make it.

I want to deal with just one insight here as to what is fundamentally wrong with the picture.

What is wrong with schools is there is a fundamentally wrong notion that most of us have. It is a notion that I hear as I go to schools. I hear teachers saying things like "I taught them, but they didn't learn." Now think of that phrase -- "I taught them, but they didn't learn." Did you ever meet a building contractor who said, "I built it, but it isn't there anymore" or how about a salesman who said, "I sold them, but they didn't buy it"? "I taught them, but they didn't learn!"

Two thousand years ago when Socrates was praised as being a good teacher he said, "No, I am not a good teacher, I am only a mid-wife." What he was saying is that I cannot give you a baby...I cannot teach you anything...I cannot give you an idea. What you learn is not a result of what I do, but the result of your work. Learning comes from the work of the student, not from the work of the teacher. The student has to listen, the student has to read, the student has to think, has to question, has to criticize, has to build, has to do all sorts of things. The work the student does results in learning and the teacher, like a mid-wife, can only be of some help. You have got to get pregnant, you have got to carry the baby, you have got to deliver the baby, and at a certain point I can be of some help, but it is the work that you do.

We have big problems in the schools and we have always had them since way back in the good old days when we had a together family and no drug problem and a traditional curriculum and lots of homework and lots of support at home. In the schools that I went to in the early thirties and forties in New York City, the percentage of kids who graduated high school was 20 percent. We have in the headlines, however, that when kids dropped out, they dropped into a different kind of world. The first year in which the majority of children graduated high school in this country was 1953. So let's not romanticize the good old days when schools were terrific. Schools were terrific for the 20 percent who made it.

What I am saying is that the way that schools are now structured basically says that if you are a special kind of kid -- if you are able to sit still, if you are able to be quiet, if you are able to listen to someone talk for five or six hours at a time and remember what that person has said, if you are able to then put it down and figure out what these questions mean, if you are able to withstand a certain amount of humiliation when you are called upon in class and you don't know the answer and everybody else is looking at you and thinking and saying that you are stupid -- if you've got all of these qualities, then you are going to be labeled a success. If you don't have these qualities, you are not going to make it.

The other thing that we say in the schools is that everybody has to learn things at the same time and in the same way. We all know that we differ. If I were to give everybody here a task to do, somebody might do it in three seconds, somebody might do it in two hours and we would all be

different. In school you had better learn it at the same time because I can only speak at one rate and if speaking is the way of reaching people, which is what we do in school most of the time. That's it.

So the question is can we create a new kind of school? Can we create a school where the kids don't all have to sit still? Where we can use technology which we didn't have before? Maybe we had to do it this way thirty or forty years ago -- I think we did. But today we have video tapes, we have audio tapes, we have computers. We might have groups of kids talking to each other. We might have things for them to build. Different ways. I am not saying different kids learning different things. I am saying different ways of reaching the same objectives.

We have 2.5 million teachers in this country. We can't have 2.5 million teachers who all know how to read and write and do mathematics and understand science. We don't have them. We are not about to produce them. If you have self-contained classrooms and put a teacher in each classroom, then you are absolutely guaranteed that you will have some big number of classrooms with people who are sub-caliber in them.

Why not change the way in which schools are staffed? Suppose that we didn't have self-contained rooms. Suppose that we had outstanding teachers who are certified by a national board who were the heads of teams and other teachers with them and para-professionals and parent volunteers and college students who want to teach later on who are the equivalent of interns and residents at hospitals. And, indeed, students who have learned something, why not give them the opportunity to be of some service by teaching it to other youngsters?

There are models like that. You just have to go to a Boy Scout troop or a Girl Scout troop and see something like that working well with a whole bunch of kids who are trying to become Eagle Scouts. They are going through a curriculum, but nobody is lecturing them. They are doing things by looking at their handbook, relating to adults, going through some institution in their community and learning something, getting an older kid to help a younger kid. Education does not have to take place by lecture only. As a matter fact, for most people it doesn't take place that way.

So, our question is how to make this happen? You can pass a law, but it won't happen that way, because any law that is passed will be resented by the people. I guess we have all learned that there is nothing we can do from above that can't be botched up by the people who have got to do it. And they generally will because they don't like being told what to do. It is for that reason that moving decision making down to the schools is very important. I guess the first thing to do is to say that we are going to stop trying to do things from above and then substantially deregulate.

Let me put it this way: what is happening at the national scene in terms of the President

saying to the governors is what ought to be done within the state. You need to define your goals. Take a limited number of things that you want to do. If you put too many things on that list you won't do it. Decide what you want as outcomes and, secondly, decide a good way of measuring them. The current measurements that we have are not good. The reason that so many kids can't write is that schools aren't measured by writing. We measure by multiple choice tests, so why bother marking all of these papers and getting kids to write something when all they have to do is check off A, B, C, or D or something like that. So find a better way of measuring.

Third, remove as many regulations as you possibly can. I would just keep in place health, safety, and civil rights and that's it. The rest of them I would remove and give people at the school level the opportunity to make changes. And then, finally, I think you need a system of accountability. You need a system of incentives. If you just give people the right to make changes, most of them will not. They won't for several reasons. One is that they all went to the same kind of schools and they can't think of anything else. The second reason is that if you are working someplace you don't want to offend the person working next to you. If I have got to work with you, I don't want to say anything that is going to offend you or make you stop talking to me or make you treat me differently.

People will not make changes if nothing is at stake. The kinds of changes that they will consider will be very different if you say, "Well, if your school succeeds in raising the achievements of youngsters by a certain amount within five years, then the following will happen. If you are terrible then the following will happen." We need to create a certain amount of team competition within the schools.

If we have learned anything from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block is that these systems are essentially what we've got in our school system -- we've got a Soviet problem. We've got loads of rules and regulations and people are basically paid to show up. A Soviet worker was asked what he thought of the system and he responded, "Well, they make believe they are paying us and we make believe we are working." We need to create a system of incentives and these are essentially the elements we need to put there in order to make it work.

Now, one final point and that is why would teachers' unions, why would school boards, why would superintendents, why would anyone accept a structure with all of these changes? There is only one reason why, I think, anyone accepts change most of the time -- except for a handful of people who have got a vision or feel the need. Most people accept change because the alternative to change is worse. And what is clearly happening in the United States. If you look at Chicago, you see school by school, external boards. If you look at Chelsea, if you look at the vouchers that

were just passed in Milwaukee you see tremendous unhappiness and discontent. I think that the people inside the schools can be convinced that they are facing the same kind of thing as the auto manufacturers faced with Japanese competition. It took them a long time and they suffered a lot of losses, but eventually they started engaging in some very good union/management cooperation and started doing some very interesting things.

It may be too late. We might still not have an oil industry left, but essentially I think that the handwriting is on the wall. The dangers are there and, if possible, we must get people within schools to move, not because they like change -- they won't like it. They will have to change a great many things, but they may very well do it because they are able to see that there are really only two choices here: they do it themselves or somebody else is going to do something that is very painful to them.

And so I will conclude with a story that I got out of Poland when I was there two years ago, still under marshall law, and when I came back I picked up a Wall Street Journal on the flight. I had just come from this very poor country, nothing in the stores, long lines for nothing that was there. And in the Wall Street Journal was an interview with a Polish economist. And I read this interview. First, I thought it was a joke, a Polish joke and I laughed at it, but I realized it was much more of a joke about American education. The Polish economist was asked if it was possible to lift the Polish economy from the state of poverty it was in to prosperity? The economist answered yes, that there were basically two ways of doing it. What were those ways? Well, one was the natural way and one was the miraculous way. What is the natural way? The natural way would be for a band of angels to descend on Poland and lift it into prosperity. And what is the miraculous way, then? The miraculous way would be if the Poles did it themselves. So I suggest to you that there will be no band of angels that will transform our schools. And it would be miraculous if we, who are in education and have been with the same kind of schools, if we did it ourselves. We had better perform that miracle because nobody else will do it for us. Thank you very much.