

Welcome and Occasion

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AFT CONFERENCE ON BUILDING ALLIANCES FOR YOUTH AT RISK

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My welcome and thanks to the AFT members, representatives from other organizations and institutions and distinguished speakers is a very special one because we are here to address a very special set of issues.

As you can see from the co-sponsorship of this conference -- the AFT's Task Force on Helping Youth at Risk Succeed and our standing Committee on Human and Civil Rights -- we see the problems facing children and their families, especially the poor and minorities, as striking at the very fabric of our democratic society. Both for moral and economic reasons, we must turn around the obscene deterioration in the condition of our youngsters' lives and future prospects. And this conference is the start of a new campaign to do so.

The AFT is a union of teachers, paraprofessionals and school related personnel, college teachers and other higher education employees, health care workers and state employees. Like all individuals, we care about our self-interest. But what makes this union special is our commitment to improving the institutions in which we work and the lives of the people whom we serve.

I don't have to recite the shocking statistics and alarming developments that tell us of the need for us to redouble that

commitment and our efforts on behalf of that commitment.

In fact, you knew the facts first -- before the media, before the statistics collectors, before the government and the American public. We in the AFT and others of you here who work in the community are in the districts and institutions where the problems of children are most visible and most acute.

In my travels around the country, long before there was even a newspaper mention of the subject, I heard elementary school teachers and paraprofessionals tell me that the number of poor youngsters and the severity of their problems were growing greater than they had ever seen before.

I heard from school bus drivers and teachers about latch-key children, hungry and neglected children.

I heard from cafeteria workers about the effects of cutbacks in child nutrition programs, and I heard teachers and paras tell me about the food they brought in from home -- not for themselves but for their students.

I heard from our nurses about increasing numbers of women, particularly poor and minority women, without pre-natal care giving birth to babies with preventable disorders and how those disorders would affect learning. I heard about the deteriorating condition of children's health, about the increase and effects of drug abuse, about the children and families turned away for lack of medical insurance.

I heard from secondary school teachers about the growing disengagement of kids from school and the inability to reach them in traditional ways.

I heard from our higher education members about the increasing number of kids getting into college who needed remedial courses and about the declining number of minority students on college campuses. And they were also the first to tell us about the shocking increase in acts of intolerance on college campuses.

And I also heard from state employees about their rising caseloads due to increasing unemployment and poverty and family and community disintegration and cutbacks in public services.

I heard from all of you about how our institutions are failing to meet the challenge and how they are in need of fundamental restructuring and improvement.

Yes, you saw it first. And we at the AFT have been trying to deliver that message to every level of government and to the public from the first day we heard it.

Now the American public, our government, business and civic leaders have the statistics and the facts. But what our children don't have yet is the level and extent of political will and action to overcome their problems.

Their need for help is acute. And while there's lots more we can and will do, we can't do it alone. Just as the various constituencies of the AFT must reach out more to one another, so

too must we reach out more to all those groups whose agenda is overcoming the problems of youth who have been placed at risk.

And those groups need us, the people who have dedicated their lives to helping children and who know all too well the shortcomings of the institutions that serve children. And so on behalf of the AFT, I urge the representatives of those groups to reach out to us.

We need you and you need us because America's forgotten children need all of us working together on their behalf.

The broader focus of this conference is not, I want to emphasize, a signal that those of us who work in the schools are trying to absolve ourselves and our institutions for the educational problems of our youngsters. Far from it. We will continue to be truthful about our shortcomings and those of the schools in which we work. Our restructuring schools agenda is as much a priority as ever. And we must do a much better job of advancing it and demonstrating to the community that it is an agenda whose goal is to enable all children in this nation to learn and to succeed.

But we cannot overcome the problems of our youth by ourselves, any more than community and other groups dedicated to this cause can do it without us.

And so that's why we're here: to strengthen alliances already built and to learn to build new ones so that together we may be

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more effective on behalf of children, from every level of government to the places where we work.

Learn from one another, be candid with one another and reach out.

We've got a big job to do. And we at the AFT are committed to that job until that hoped for time when there's no more need to utter that tragic and terrible phrase -- youth at risk, a nation at risk.

Thank you and have a good conference.