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**Speech to Commonwealth Club of California
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Thank you for inviting me to speak to this distinguished audience.

I want to say a few things about myself before I get into this speech: First, I grew up in a poor and so-called dysfunctional family, in a tough neighborhood in Coney Island, NY. No one taught me to read before I went to school and kindergarten was the first place I saw different kinds of musical instruments, among other things. If a good public school hadn't been available and accessible a short walk from the city-owned slum I lived in, I wouldn't be standing here today addressing the distinguished Commonwealth Club.

I tell you this so you understand that while it certainly is the job of a teacher union leader to defend the public schools, my commitment to universal quality public education – especially for poor children – runs very deep, and it's very personal. But that

same deep commitment makes me equally passionate about doing all we can to make those public schools the best they can be – for all children.

I have unequivocally advocated the closing and redesign of longtime low-performing schools, for example. As a union leader in New York City, I actively participated in doing it. And the AFT is now deeply involved in helping local districts work with their local teachers union to make that happen without dissolving into counterproductive conflict, which is what happens when school officials assume that just getting rid of staff will solve the problem. I'll have more to say on that later.

The AFT did a study that first documented the issue of rampant social promotion; we called for stopping it, and put forward a program of timely intervention. Many school districts are now doing this, with full cooperation of their local AFT.

So, though I'm a strong advocate for public schools, and proudly so, I want to make it crystal clear that I am just as much

an advocate for needed change – and many of our schools need improvement urgently.

I'm especially proud that my union, the American Federation of Teachers, stands second to none in our willingness to criticize public schools, and to face the truth about their shortcomings, no matter how painful it is. We know – probably better than most – that the status quo in many of our schools is unacceptable – unacceptable to our members, to parents, and to the taxpayers who support public education. And we've been saying so for a long time. AFT members, including members of United Educators of San Francisco, are working, even as we speak, on changing the educational status quo.

I want to talk to you tonight about the kinds of changes our schools need. I'm not going to dwell on the problems. You all read newspapers – some of you write for them – you know what the problems are: decades of lowered standards, lack of good discipline, shameful neglect of school buildings, and more.

But the AFT has been fighting for years to improve public schools working with the business community and elected officials and others who are committed to raising standards. And that fight is making a difference. Education reform is working. The trends are all in the right direction. **We need to stay the course.**

Let me give you a quick summary of some good news about our schools – because you rarely hear it.

Just recently, in a report that got little attention, the Census Bureau found that 86 percent of young blacks between the ages of 25 and 29 were high school graduates -- 86 percent compared to 87 percent of whites, up from 50 percent of blacks and 73 percent of whites in 1965. We've closed the gap, and that's tremendous progress.

Our current high school dropout rate is down to single digits, including in many of our toughest neighborhoods. While the dropout rate of Hispanic students is still greater than that of their peers, there, too, the trend is going in the right direction.

Test scores are up, with the increase in many of our cities exceeding even state and national averages. Many more students, particularly minority children, are taking the SAT and Advanced Placement tests -- and they're doing better than ever.

- In New Orleans, the number of students taking the SAT increased 117 percent from 1995 to 1997.
- In New York City, there's been significant improvement in reading and mathematics, especially in the poorest schools.
- In Chicago, schools are improving on state criteria at a faster rate than the state as a whole.
- In California, the current average SAT score is higher than the national average. And right here in San Francisco, student test scores are up – especially in the early grades, where the effort to reduce class size is bearing fruit.

There's more...but this isn't a data seminar. I can't help but point out, though, that schools are doing this during a period when childhood poverty in America remains the highest in the industrialized world.

What kinds of changes have brought about this progress?

Not the so-called reforms we hear so much about – vouchers, privatization, and the like – but the solid, common-sense changes we have been calling for: higher academic standards, improved safety and discipline, smaller classes – and programs with a solid track record of success behind them.

Let's remember that whatever happens with voucher and privatization experiments, the overwhelming majority of America's children is in public schools and is likely to remain in public schools. And when we talk about reforming schools, the acid test must be: **does this improve overall student achievement?**

Some people argue that the cure for ailing public schools is “the discipline of the market” – competition from the private sector, like vouchers.

But we simply do not believe – nor do we see any evidence – that this strategy could deliver opportunity and quality to the vast majority of America's 52 million schoolchildren, or that it offers the best hope for poor children, or that it would keep alive

what public schools have for 200 years – a continuously strengthening democracy.

On a practical level, with vouchers, we're gambling scarce funds from public schools on an experiment where evidence to date clearly shows it doesn't work (in Cleveland and Milwaukee).

But there is an alternative to both the unacceptable status quo and radical and unproven schemes like vouchers. Research on student achievement has been steadily accumulating, and we now have a solid body of evidence about what works to boost learning and improve schools. **We need to do what works!**

What works to improve learning is surprisingly straightforward. In fact, it's downright unglamorous. It's old-fashioned, and it's common sense. But it's hard work and it's easier said than done. The research confirms what parents and teachers have long known: High academic standards, support for children who need it to meet those standards; meticulous, relentless attention to individual student progress; safe,

disciplined classrooms, good teachers, and smaller classes.

These are the things that improve student learning.

Let me take just two examples – class size and turning around low-performing schools – a practice known in these parts as “reconstitution.”

First, the issue of class size.

The research findings on the effects of class size are dramatic. Researcher Alex Molnar of the University of Wisconsin sums it up this way: “There is no longer any argument about whether or not reducing class size in the elementary grades increases student achievement. The research evidence is quite clear: It does.”

Smaller classes alone are not, of course, a panacea. But one of the most remarkable findings of this research is that even if **all** we did was to reduce class size in the early grades, we would **still** see student achievement going up. We’re seeing it already, here in California.

I know that California's class size reduction initiative has created a whole host of opportunities and problems – among them, a teacher shortage. But it's just plain **wrong** to hand out so-called emergency credentials and hire people not qualified to teach just so there's a warm body in front of those smaller classes.

We can't lower our standards for teachers when we're trying to raise them for students!

But we are doing that all over the place, including here in California, where statewide some 30 percent of the teachers hired since the class size reduction initiative are without teaching credentials. Some of them will become good teachers, I'm sure. But most of them will not – and this is a dangerous thing to do.

Just think about the teaching of reading. Think of yourself – a college graduate, intelligent, capable, successful. Would you walk into a classroom of second graders and dare the daunting task of teaching them to read?

Let me quote to you from a January 1998 *Wall Street Journal* story about the effort here in California to get former military people and Silicon Valley-types into classrooms. It's called the California Aerospace and Defense Worker Act. Unlike teachers entering through the traditional route, which is pretty rigorous in California, these folks can enter teaching with just a bachelor's degree. Then after a quick, crash training program, they are paid while learning to teach or given healthy government grants to help defer college tuition. Eventually, they have to pass the exams required of subject-matter teachers in junior and senior high school.

This is a pretty attractive package, especially considering what regular teacher candidates in California have to go through, at their own expense.

Yet, despite these incentives, the state admits that the response is (quote) "not nearly as good as we had hoped."

Why not?

For starters, (quote) “you could count the people in the audience” at the recruitment sessions. And it only got worse when a recruiter told the audience what a beginning teacher’s salary is: about \$24,000 to \$30,000 a year. As one recruiter put it: (quote) “After they got done laughing, they got up and went on their merry ways.”

But there’s even more to the story. Take the aerospace engineers from the Los Angeles area – all 15 of them. Only half passed the exams. Or the candidates who completed the entire alternative process and then dropped their new career before they even got into the classroom. Only one person in a graduating class of 20 former military officers and engineers actually entered teaching. (quote) “The remaining 19 retired rather than face the classroom.”

Listen to what a retired military man, who served in Vietnam and Desert Storm, said about why he walked away from teaching: “Teaching is a very demanding job.”

Listen to the former electronics technician who walked away from his job teaching humanities to 7th graders: “I’ve worked hard before, but teaching is the toughest job I’ve ever had, bar none.”

What about the relative handful who made it through and stayed? As one retired Air Force officer said, “It is a lot harder than I thought it was, so you’ve really got to love your work.... You’re never going to get rich being a teacher, so you’ve got to love the job.”

I tell you this because some people argue that you can staff schools through this approach. They think that teachers unions’ support for certification standards is keeping brilliant historians out of our schools; or Warren Buffetts, or budding Albert Einsteins.

Now, the AFT is on record in support of good alternative certification programs. We like to see poets and artists in our schools. And we welcome scientists and mathematicians now working elsewhere into our classrooms.

But, really, isn't all this talk about John Hope Franklin or Warren Buffett or Albert Einstein being kept out of schools because of teaching standards just a red herring?

Isn't the real story, the one no one wants to talk about, a story about how, in districts where attracting teachers has become a chronic problem, alternative certification doesn't get us many geniuses or poets or even enough Teach for America kids?

The truth is, in places that have the toughest conditions and pay the least – translation: the schools serving the poorest, neediest children – teaching standards aren't the problem. The problem is the chronic undermining of those standards through “emergency” credentials and misassignment of teachers to classes they aren't trained to teach. That's our teacher quality problem!

That is why I have called for an immediate end to emergency credentials for teachers. And I don't make this proposal lightly, because I know it will precipitate serious shortages in many places. But the AFT is prepared to help our local unions do their

part to accommodate these shortages until qualified teachers can be found, by working with state and local education officials to find ways around putting unqualified people in our children's classrooms.

We can't do it alone, obviously, and management hasn't done it. But much can be done about this problem through union-management cooperation, through partnership and collaboration. Such things as incentives to keep experienced teachers planning to retire; flexible scheduling and part-time teaching; additional pay for getting certified in another subject or taking on extra classes. All of these are things that can be worked out between the union and school management – if there's a will to do it and a partnership.

We're facing the replacement of 2 million teachers nationwide over the next decade – 300,000 here in California alone. We're not going to find the same numbers of terrific women who are the mainstay of our schools right now; there are too many other options out there. Not if we don't increase

salaries, and that alone won't do it. **We have to stay the course on real reform.**

Which leads me to a brief discussion about one other urgent matter: fixing failing schools. This is an urgent issue for AFT members across the country, in part because, under the name of reconstitution, it is often badly done and, in larger part, because teachers want failing schools fixed as much as parents do.

Last winter, we held an unprecedented conference on proven, research-based strategies for turning around failing schools. Union leaders and members from AFT affiliates in major cities across the country came to this conference. And because teachers and their unions can't make these changes alone, they were joined by superintendents, school board members, parents, and state legislators. All of these districts are now working on using proven programs to turn around failing schools – and some are already showing success. We are doing it so well we've just won a Ford Foundation grant that will enable us to expand from the eight districts we're presently in to five more.

I believe it is our imperative, our obligation, to stop being distracted by sideshows like vouchers and to focus relentlessly on bringing these kind of research-based approaches and proven programs to our students – and to our teachers.

I believe it's irresponsible to ignore the evidence about what works when it enables us to make real and immediate changes to improve student learning.

We want to work with elected officials and school boards and colleges, and everyone else involved to make sure we get the best possible people into teaching.

But that also means staying the course on high standards, lower class sizes, and research-based reform. These are the things that work.

I have said over and over again to my own members and to the public: Let's hold our schools to the highest standard: would we want our own child to be there?

The children of America – including the poorest, the neediest, and the most difficult – are as able, and as smart as children anywhere.

It is inexcusable for the greatest, wealthiest nation in the world not to give them the schools they need and deserve.

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