

**Remarks by David Hecker, President, AFT Michigan
State Board of Education
March 9, 2010**

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to speak.

The bottom line is children and adults having access to a high quality education. An education that enhances achievement and produces a well-rounded individual prepared for the world and all that it brings.

Before I get into some specifics let me say that this bottom line cannot be achieved solely within the four walls of a schoolhouse or the bordering streets of a college campus. Union critics will label this statement as a cop out. I label it reality.

Let me also make it clear that we are not against meaningful reform. Heck, we have proposed it. The key word here is "meaningful." Not the latest fad. Not the idea that will grab a headline.

Education Funding, Restructuring and Reform

I will not review the financial numbers. We all know them. But I will say what the numbers mean because everyone does not understand, pretends not to understand, or understands but doesn't care.

Funding cuts, as costs and mandates increase, mean fewer programs, less services, larger classes, unclean schools and, very understandably people saying: "do I really want to go into or stay in education." And this means that, in spite of the incredible work of school employees, students get screwed. Forgive my bluntness but that is what happens. And it isn't just that programs are cut. Much needed programs aren't implemented. Every piece of research states the importance of early childhood education. My children received it because we paid for them to go to pre-school. By not properly funding early childhood education our state is saying to many families that you if you cannot pay for early childhood education, your child does not matter.

Heck, we do not even require kindergarten.

And with an increasingly smaller proportion of the state budget spent on community colleges and higher education, access is reduced as tuition is increased to cover costs.

Moreover the Promise Grant was dropped and state funding for work-study programs was eliminated. Financial aid for students agreeing to pursue nursing careers in Michigan; a crying need in our hospitals was dropped.

Is more funding sufficient to address the shortcomings of our education system? Of course not. Is more funding necessary to address the deficiencies of our education system—absolutely.

So those who say that schools should just cut spending, that stabilized funding or, can we even dream, an increase in funding is not necessary have an agenda that has little to do with the education of our students.

Those who say just cut spending, like cuts are not being made. Believe me, it happens each and every day at the bargaining table. Moreover, smart ideas for saving money are discussed through collective bargaining. We consistently propose ways to save on health care and often times have to fight to have these ideas accepted.

Some have proposed legislation to mandate public employees pay 20 % of health care and take a five percent pay cut. There is legislation that mandates school districts and other units of government to choose their health plans from a state-created set of options. There are proposals to undermine state and school employees' retirement benefits.

We hear that by spending money on benefits, pay, retirement, well that is money that does not go into the classroom. When I was in school my desk, the blackboard, or the American flag hanging in the corner did not teach me. A teacher taught me. The most important determinant of a quality education is the quality of the teacher in the classroom. You pay for quality.

We have legislation to mandate the privatization of school support services. The thought is districts can save money by doing this. Sometimes that may save money, often times they will not.

With privatization, school employees who have done so much for the children from teaching them to read, getting them to school, to providing them with lunch may or may not be hired by the private company.

And even if they are hired, you are then creating families who can provide less for their children, who, by the way, are our students, therefore creating students who will now be coming to school with all of the disadvantages low income children bring—poorer nutrition, parents working multiple jobs and not home, no access to all of the advantages my children have.

We need revenue. AFT Michigan supports the plan of A Better Michigan Future. We have long called for a significant restructuring of our taxation system, which is based on an outdated model that has an overemphasis on goods and an under-emphasis on services.

The two major revenue changes we recommend: extending the six percent sales tax to services and instituting a graduated income tax.

Regarding the service tax, we could exclude business-to-business taxes, health care and nonprofit organizations and still realize \$ 1.65 billion in annual revenue. It is absurd that you buy a winter coat for your daughter and pay sales tax (which you should), while the golfer at the country club does not pay sales tax—just one example.

A graduated income tax could reduce the tax burden of 90 percent of Michigan citizens and still raise over a half a billion. Only seven states have a flat tax. Long ago we discovered the world is not flat. It is time to realize a flat tax is not fair and is not the answer.

It is not about getting re-elected. It is about providing for Michigan's future.

In addition to enhancing funding we need to figure out how best for the state to allocate the funds. We have to properly deal with declining enrollment districts, not just in a token manner. We have to realize that educating a child costs more in some districts than others and I am not referring to differences in collective bargaining agreements. We have to figure out how to deal with the fact that my children have come home to everything they need to support their education. Many children do not. It is not just what happens within the four walls.

There is much talk about restructuring our education system—sharing of services, consolidation.

There already is a great deal of sharing of services. I know our Le'Cheneaux district shares a superintendent with Detour. I know there is consolidation of purchasing to get a better price. Can there be more? My guess is yes.

On consolidation of districts, two points: 1) how much will it really save, and 2) how does it impact communities and their involvement with their schools. If two districts combine we still need the teacher in the classroom, the secretary running the school, the custodian cleaning it, and the engineer heating it.

Later I will talk about community schools. The support and involvement of the community with our schools is essential. These districts are tight communities. We live in Huntington Woods and join with north Oak Park and Berkley to form the Berkley District. What would happen if all of Oak Park and Ferndale and Pleasant Ridge all combined with the Berkley District? Those are good communities but I think a good deal would be lost. We are concerned that if districts combine, community involvement and support will be harder to achieve.

And we need to very careful about "top down" consolidation. Forcing it on communities is a recipe for disaster.

Once allocated to districts we need to spend the money wisely. We need to spend the funds to positively impact instruction to increase student learning.

We need to implement research based reforms, not the latest fad.

We need:

- * Universal early childhood education.
- Early intervention for struggling students.
- Smaller classes.
- Smaller schools, not that some large schools do not work.
- Schools as community centers. Centers that provide students and their families with important services. Centers that bring the parents and the community into our schools.
- A quality teacher in every classroom.
- A well-rounded curriculum.
- A limit on standardized testing and, therefore, the need to teach to the test.
- Funded mentoring programs.
- Collaborative, shared decision-making.
- As our national president Randi Weingarten has stated, we all need to view “collective bargaining [as not] only a vehicle to protect employee rights and workplace fairness, ...but also as a vehicle for both sides to improve teacher [and staff] quality, ensure school improvement and establish rigorous academic standards.” Our recent DFT contract is a great example. It includes Peer Assistance and Review, jointly developed and implemented professional development, school wide bonuses, priority schools. It was negotiated. Not imposed top down. That is key.
- Meaningful professional developed, implemented jointly with employees and their unions.
- Not just evaluation systems that are “I gotcha” systems, but constructive evaluation and development systems that help teachers and staff improve and develop. Randi Weingarten, has proposed, rigorous reviews by trained expert and peer evaluators and principals. The goal is to lift whole schools and systems: to

help promising teachers improve, good teachers to become great, and to identify those teachers who just shouldn't be in the classroom.

- An Okemos High School infrastructure for every student, not just those at the economic status of many Okemos families.
- Administrators to do their jobs. There should never be a case where an ineffective teacher is granted tenure because the administrator messed up the process. Never let an ineffective tenured teacher who has been provided assistance, support and time to improve, and is no better as a result, continue to teach. Counsel the teacher out of the profession. If the teacher will not go build the case, follow the process and fire ineffective teachers. Please. To those who say the process takes too long. Hire more administrative law judges to hear tenure cases.

We do not need proposed silver bullets or fads for funding, restructuring or reform. In her new book, in which she reverses her long held beliefs on education (subtitle: How testing and choice are undermining education) Diane Ravitch writes: "School reformers sometimes resemble...Dumbo (her comparison), they are convinced they could fly if they only had a magic feather. ...I have consistently warned that, in education, there are no shortcuts, no utopias, and no silver bullets. For certain, there are no magic feathers that enable elephants to fly."

We must deal with facts and not opinions. For example, we have great respect for charter school teachers and staff and want their students to receive a great education. But the facts are that while some charters are doing a good job, as a whole, charter schools do not perform any better, if as well, as traditional public schools. Yet elected officials on both sides of the aisle, including President Obama, are blind to this reality.

We know of no research that has found that merit pay enhances student learning. Yet it is considered a magic bullet.

So that is it in somewhat more than a nutshell. Financing, restructuring and reform.

In closing let me thank you again for this opportunity and to ask that as you develop your recommendations you strive to do everything you can to provide meaningful and constructive support to our teachers and staff, and therefore, to our bottom line, our students. Teachers like the Taylor School District's Emily Graham:

"I teach because I care. I teach because I know I make a difference. I teach because I place a high value on children, and believe in my heart that it should be of the utmost priority to teach this generation how important education is. I teach because I want to change the world...I teach because it is my love, it is my passion, it is my future."

Thank you.