

Remarks by AFT President Randi Weingarten
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(Acknowledgements)

I want to read you something, which is how I was going to start today:

So, anyone in this room not feel urgency to improve public education? Let's see a show of hands. Anyone not feel urgency? OK, for the record, since we're being transcribed, there's not a hand that went up.

Anyone in this room feel like they are a member of the status quo crowd? Again, for the record, not a hand went up.

Anyone get into education because you didn't care about kids? Because you didn't want to make a difference in the lives of children? Again, not a hand went up.

Anyone in this room wake up this morning and say, "I'm going to spend my day doing something really awful for kids"? Anyone wake up this morning saying that?

Now, the reason I wanted to start the speech this way is because that is the way I started a speech on collaboration in October 2010 in Washington, D.C. No hands were raised then, and no hands were raised today. Just a couple of days ago, I read a story in the Los Angeles Times about John Deasy's departure as the Los Angeles superintendent; and I could see that his proponents, who didn't want him to leave, were suggesting the very same thing about us four years later that they suggested then. So, where is their urgency to change things when you're seeing the very same arguments, the very same words, the very same way?

So, think about what they're saying. That the only strategy that works in schools is this top-down, my-way-or-the-highway, test-fixated approach. Where high-stakes English and math test data should dictate every decision about student promotion, teacher retention and public school existence. Where competition, sanctions and merit pay—and doing more with less—are the incentives that actually drive schools and educators to help all students thrive.

That, essentially in a paragraph, is what their belief system is. Not using data to inform instruction, but having high-stakes test results in English and mathematics drive everything in a factory-based way. That's who they are. With competition, merit pay, sanctions and, of course, as Josh and Dean have touched on, doing more with less.

But this is the problem, my friends—and you know this as well as I do, and, frankly, more of the country knows this—it doesn't work. If it worked, our schools would be just off the charts. (Remember what Eli Broad promised, and remember we've had this for a long time.) And frankly, we are doing a little better. And the graduation rates are a little

better. But the time that we most decreased the achievement gap was in the 60s and the 70s, at the start of ESEA, with the funding that LBJ and others gave us for and to attack poverty. And now, you know as well as I do, that everybody in this room, anything that is thrown at you, you will try to figure it out. So, it's no surprise that things are inching along, even with the wrong strategies.

But the bottom line is this: We in this room know a different way. Instead of austerity, instead of privatization, instead of deprofessionalization, we can actually invest in public education. What a concept. We can actually, as Dean said, support and improve teaching and learning, and teaching and learning environments. And we can actually address poverty. And, I would argue to you, it all starts with collaboration.

To me that means building trust and capacity around the shared mission of helping all our kids reach their God-given potential. You know this as well as I do, in some ways maybe better. Every single day, we are being asked to help prepare all kids, not just some kids, for their futures. Our economy is changing quickly, our student population is more diverse, our school system is more segregated, poverty is on the rise, resources in many states are scarce; and two-thirds of what affects student achievement happens outside of the classroom.

Yet even with all of these challenges, we know what we need to do. We can reclaim the promise of public education if we invest in strong neighborhood public schools that are safe, collaborative and welcoming environments for students, for parents, for educators and the broader community. Schools where teachers and school staff are well-prepared, well-supported, have manageable class sizes and time to collaborate. Schools with rigorous standards aligned to an engaging curriculum that focuses on teaching and learning, not on testing, and that includes art and music and civics and the sciences—where all kids' instructional needs are met. Schools with multiple pathways to graduation. Schools with evaluation systems that are not about sorting and firing but are about teaching and learning. And schools with wraparound services to address our children's social, emotional and health needs. And we can reclaim the promise of public education if we work with community.

Parents are asking us to do this. In fact, they're begging us to do this. They want their kids, our kids, to be prepared for the workplace for today and tomorrow. They know there are no factory jobs. They're saying "help our kids, so they can be the problem solvers for today and tomorrow; help them be critical thinkers." They're saying the same thing we're saying, frankly, in teachers' lounges. They don't want kids to just be prepared to take a bubble-test. They're even saying this in poll after poll after poll. How negative parents are about testing. They know that rote memorization isn't the way to learn, and it snuffs out the joy and creativity of teaching and learning.

They're asking us to transform our schools for the 21st century. And frankly, they trust us to do it. The American public, particularly parents, want great neighborhood public schools; and they love their teachers. The PDK/Gallop poll that came out a few weeks ago said that 64 percent of the Americans trust their teachers. And when the new

Democrats for Public Education group polled parents, that number went up to 91 percent for public school parents.

We know, you in this room, we know we have a great responsibility. And we know we have learned a lot about how to help all kids succeed. That list that I just read in terms of how you reclaim the promise of public education—it is based in research and in common sense. So, the question in this room for us is not whether, it's how. And that's our mission, and that's our passion.

And that's why I start with collaboration. Collaboration is not, as I said before, a silver bullet, but it is an essential tool that builds a culture of trust. It's a way to engender collective responsibility. It builds public confidence in what we're doing. And these days I tend to use T words: trust, time, teamwork, tools, transparency, tenacity and, most important, trying. Because, if we don't build a culture of trust so we can try new things, or try different things, how will we ever succeed? How will we ever sustain? How will we ever scale up?

And we took—frankly, we stole, we asked their permission—the notion of solution-driven unionism right from ABC, where their mantra is: We work to solve problems not to win arguments. That's the essence of collaboration. And as I said earlier, you see that transformative effect by seeing that this is the culture that superintendent after superintendent, and union leader after union leader, have not just grumbled about but actually made better and better. Generation to generation. And what do you see in results? A graduation rate that has remained close to 90 percent for the past four years. And instead of demoralization, there's tremendously high morale in the schools in this district.

We've seen that internationally, as well. Look at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (the meeting I was supposed to be at this week); their TALIS survey shows that countries that are consistently high-performing are those in which everyone works to create a collaborative culture in schools.

Tony Bryk, Greg Anrig, Saul Rubenstein—all say the same thing. This is what the research says; this is what common sense says. And yet, we've got the my-way-or-the-highway approach that dominates the narrative.

So, maybe someday, someone will show me an example of how an autocratic, hierarchical, my-way-or-the-highway approach works over the long term for transformational change. I've been in this work since 1985. You do the math; I'm not a math teacher. I have never seen that work, over the long term, for obvious reasons.

And frankly, there's a huge opportunity now, given what just happened up the street with LAUSD. And with the superintendent's resignation. Now, I like John Deasy, he's a longtime personal friend, but frankly, John, who relied so strongly on funding from the philanthropic community, was serving two masters. The likes of the Eli Broads and the Waltons, their interests and their ideologies, and then a real elected school board who

believed that they were representing kids and community, and who had the confidence of the community.

But ultimately, his undoing, was something we see in school districts across the country. A refusal to deeply work with those closest to the classroom. As the Los Angeles Times editorial noted, “he failed to give teachers a voice.”

And this “us-versus-them” mentality is nothing new. For two decades, we’ve been fighting the likes of Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein and Cami Anderson, and their politics of division continues to dominate the discourse about our nation’s schools.

And frankly—and this will be the only political note I will make—if Marshall Tuck is elected as state superintendent of the state of California, that’s the way he’s going too. He’s told you that. He just yesterday said and tweeted how “great it is to have Michelle Rhee’s support.” And Tom Torlakson is an educator through and through, who has worked his entire career to create collaborative models around public education.

At the very same time, think about what’s happening in California. One of our colleagues from California said it. This year there are no furloughs. Think about the “no-accountability” systems, the holding off on the testing, the not buying into Race to the Top, the resources that have come. Think about the changes that have happened since Jerry Brown and Tom Torlakson have been here. Think about it.

Think about it. Because what they’ve done tried to figure out how to work with us, instead of pointing fingers. They don’t believe there are only two speeds for teachers: miracle worker or complete failure. They know, and we know, teachers want to share. Teachers want to collaborate, to work together. So that’s why I’ve never gotten the my-way-or-the-highway routine, because, if you know that about teachers, why wouldn’t you give us a seat at the table?

Maybe because collaboration is hard, and it does little to turn individuals into heroes or superstars. Instead, it’s quietly, slowly and steadily turning foes into allies with one aim—partnering for student success. Maybe it’s because our work is so complex, it doesn’t give you an easy scapegoat, because it’s hard to scapegoat those who are really the partners. It’s hard to blame those who are really the partners. But whatever it is, the John Wayne attitude may play well in an old Hollywood movie, but it doesn’t play well in our schools. Because, here’s the secret: If you want to go fast, go alone. And as you see from all your different charts here, if you want to go far, even in a bicycle race, you go together. And we want to go far.

And the big question I want to leave you with, my friends, is how do we scale up and sustain what’s working? Because we can’t just have it in ABC, or Culver City, or Lawrence, Mass.

So, number one, we need resources to scale up. Yet, as we’ve learned from a new report from the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, at least 30 states are funding education

at a lower level than before the recession. At least 30 states, right now, this week, are funding education at a lower level than in the Great Recession. In fact, there was an article in the New York Times that said there are actually about 350,000 fewer education jobs than there should be (per the population) and given what we need for kids. When state funding accounts for 46 percent of the average state's budget, that's a major deficit that needs to be addressed. That's the equity question, because we are the only country in the world, in the OECD nations, that give the kids that need the most, the least. Every other country that is part of the OECD actually, at least, gives kids the same. So, we need resources to scale up.

And second, we need collaboration to sustain. Collaboration is the vehicle that creates trust. It's the vehicle that enables risk. It's the vehicle that enables shared responsibility; it's the vehicle that has all our backs as opposed to throwing us under the bus, or under the bicycle. And it's the vehicle that gives parents confidence in our public schools and our public institutions.

I love the story I heard in the last few days about Culver City. Prior to the partnership, the relationship was adversarial, and characterized by pervasive distrust. The district criticized the union regularly, even making personalized attacks on union leaders. And now, the superintendent and the union have made a commitment to "not let each other fail." Morale is on the rise, the community is together, anti-union voices are quieting. And the sense of shared mission is rippling out.

You see the same thing in New York City, when every time there is an issue, Michael Mulgrew (the union president) and the superintendent are working together, on the phone. Someone from the school district said to me, "With the union and management not fighting anymore, we're seeing real promise." That's the promise of collaboration.

I'm going to leave you with one more thing. We do complex work. You know that. You do that every day. It's not simply educating one child; we educate generations and generations of children. We educate thousands of children, all of whom are very, very special and, quite frankly, all of whom are really different, with really different needs.

So, does anyone in this room really think that we have all of the knowledge, and all of the information, and all the ways of acting that will help every single child in our jurisdictions to be prepared for their lives and for their futures? Do any of us, individually, have all that reposed in our minds or in our hearts? And if we don't, who are we going to work with to get this done?

And to my colleagues on the management side, I say to you, are the people in classrooms really going to work with any of us after they've just been screamed at? After we've just told them what pieces of you-know-what somebody thinks they are? After we've just told them, like on the cover of Time magazine so many years ago, "they're like mere dust that should be swept up"? You know the answer to that.

And to my friends, colleagues, and my sisters and brothers on the union side, is a

manager or a principal really going to be willing to help us solve a problem after we've punched the living daylights out of them? Really? Who would ever want to solve a problem if that happens?

So, if we really believe in children, in the mission of making a difference in their lives, and in helping our members have the skills and knowledge, tools and time, to do that, then we have no choice but to figure out how to collaborate. And when we do, not if we do, we can solve problems and transform our school systems to help all kids succeed.

You know it works. I know it works. We've seen it in ABC. We've seen it in St. Louise, Lawrence. We've seen it in Culver. We've seen it in New Haven. Now, our job, collectively—the unions' work, the school districts' work, the public's work—our job is to sustain and scale up these quiet successes, make sure they aren't drowned out by the top-down, John Wayne approach that's failing our kids. We must commit to roll up our sleeves and sit down at the table together, and engage in a way that everyone will feel great about and be proud of.

Thank you very much.