



A Union of Professionals

AFT News Release

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**AFT's Weingarten on Education and the Economy: "Reinvest, Don't Disinvest"
Calls for Shared Responsibility and Renewed Respect for Teachers
Except Vouchers, "Put Everything on the Table That's Good for Children, Fair to Teachers"**

WASHINGTON—Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, today outlined both provocative and proven approaches to improve public education and thus make a long-term investment in the country's lagging economy, and she expressed her desire to seek common ground on various contentious issues often thought to be off-limits for teachers unions.

Speaking at the National Press Club in her first major speech since being elected AFT president in July, Weingarten said, "With the exception of vouchers, which siphon scarce resources from public schools, no issue should be off the table, provided it is good for children and fair to teachers." With this proposition, Weingarten said, she was taking the "first step" toward a new shared responsibility for improving public education. Weingarten urged all stakeholders—parents, teachers, school administrators, business leaders and elected officials—to share in this responsibility, invest not disinvest in schools, respect teachers and confront tough, often divisive issues, including tenure, differentiated pay and teacher assignment.

Mayor Bloomberg praised Weingarten's vision and called the educational accomplishments in New York City "a model of what can be achieved by working together."

"While the interests of school management and teachers unions won't always be the same," Bloomberg said, "we always need to find ways to work together."

In light of the serious budget constraints plaguing many school systems, Weingarten called for targeted investments and policies that challenge schools, provide them the tools they need, and demand they do the very best for all children.

"At a time when state and local governments are cutting programs of all kinds, no cutbacks are as harmful as cutting back on our children's futures," Weingarten said. "Our young people are coming of age in an economy that demands ever-increasing levels of knowledge, skill and adaptability."

Weingarten continued: "Let's choose to advance, not retreat; to promote collaboration, not conflict; and to build a better future for our young people, not blame each other for our failure to fulfill

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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the responsibility that history has handed us.” Weingarten said of America’s economy and public education system: “Neither can be strong when the other is weak.”

Weingarten decried the widespread scapegoating of teachers and teachers unions for public education’s shortcomings. In visits with teachers in 17 states since her recent election, she said, many teachers were distressed that they and their work are being demeaned by politicians, the press and even the people who run their school systems.

“The blame game won’t improve one more school, educate one more child, or recruit and retain one more outstanding teacher,” said Weingarten, a frequent critic of top-down approaches to school reform that devalue teachers and their integral role in reform. “When education reform is done without teachers’ input, it is doomed to failure. When education reform is done *with* teachers, it is destined for success.”

Smart Investments in Education:

The federal No Child Left Behind Act “has become a stand-in for real discussions at the state and national levels about a robust education policy that prepares our children for the 21st century,” Weingarten said. Congress will take up reauthorization of NCLB, but in the meantime, Weingarten proposed what she called “smart investments in education” that can be debated, decided and implemented immediately. The 10-point Smart Investments in Education proposal calls for:

1. Providing universal early childhood education, starting with low-income children.
2. Preparing young people for high-skill, high-demand “green jobs.”
3. Providing a boost to high-achieving students from low-income households.
4. Offering high-quality educational choices within the public school system.
5. Focusing intensely on improving low-performing schools.
6. Establishing community schools that serve the neediest children by bringing together services that they and their families need.
7. Ensuring that every school facility is a place where teachers can teach and students can learn.
8. Expanding teacher induction so that new teachers are not left to sink or swim.
9. Creating an online teacher resource network with information on curriculum, lesson plans and source documents to enhance teaching.
10. Offering every student a well-rounded education that would stand in stark contrast to the “standardized test score competition” that has resulted from NCLB.

Common Ground on Controversial Issues:

On tenure: Weingarten said some see tenure “as a fortress that protects incompetent teachers from ever being fired.” Weingarten differed, saying that teachers are the first to want to remove incompetent teachers. “Some people think that tenure is a guarantee of a job for life. It isn’t, and it shouldn’t be. It is, instead, a simple promise to teachers: First, you go through induction, certification and probation—after which administrators decide whether to grant you tenure. Then dismissals can’t be arbitrary; there needs to be just cause.”

She advocated peer assistance and review programs as an effective way to improve teacher quality. These programs use lead teachers to help new teachers learn their jobs, help struggling colleagues do better, and counsel failing colleagues out of the profession. Delegates to the AFT convention this past summer adopted a policy calling on local unions “to make the tenure process more rigorous” through peer assistance and review.

On differentiated pay: First, Weingarten said, all teachers should receive “decent salaries.” Over and above that, she advocated paying more to teachers who take on additional responsibilities, who work in hard-to-staff schools or in subjects with shortages of qualified teachers, or who are mentors for their fellow teachers to achieve schoolwide excellence.

In New York City, forced transfers to more challenging schools were eliminated, thanks to a 2002-2008 contract Weingarten negotiated with Mayor Bloomberg that included salary increases, attention to school safety and professional support to help teachers if they are floundering. New York City schools with 80-plus percent poverty levels now have the same proportion of experienced teachers as other schools, she said.

AFT’s Ongoing Leadership in Shared Responsibility for Reform: The AFT Innovation Fund

“At the AFT, we aren’t just asking our nation’s leaders to invest in innovations. We’re putting our money where our mouth is,” Weingarten said of the AFT Innovation Fund. The fund supports local educator- and union-led efforts to improve public schools and accelerate reform. She introduced the just-announced co-chairs of the AFT Innovation Fund, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, an experienced educator, administrator and researcher of public urban education, and Tom Vilsack, former governor of Iowa. Weingarten also introduced Adam Urbanski, the president of AFT’s Rochester, N.Y., affiliate, who will run the fund.

Weingarten concluded by expressing America’s teachers’ willingness to “build a better future for our young people,” and their hope that others will join them in this important shared responsibility.

The full text of the speech is available at: www.aft.org.

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The AFT represents more than 1.4 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; nurses and healthcare workers; and early childhood educators.