



*A Union of Professionals*

**After the Election:  
Making the Right Choices  
for Education and the Economy**

**Remarks by Randi Weingarten  
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Thank you, Mr. Mayor, for that great introduction.

The mayor and I both care passionately about public education. That doesn't mean we always see eye to eye about how to translate caring into action. But we met each other halfway and learned to work together to find real solutions to the challenges confronting our schools—and New York's kids are better for it.

Today, I'm here not as a New Yorker, but as the president of the American Federation of Teachers. I'm a former public high school teacher myself, the daughter of a public school teacher, a child advocate and a proud trade unionist. Like the mayor, I'm on a mission to help all our students succeed.

Now, my speech has a very lofty title. Some of you might be saying, "I get the education part, but did you know she's an economist?" Well, I'm not. But I know enough about our economy and our education system to know that neither can be strong when the other is weak. And growing the economy and creating a shared prosperity requires a well-educated, well-prepared workforce.

We can't do that unless all our children have access to a well-rounded and rigorous education. Quality education for all is an economic necessity, a moral imperative and a fundamental civil right, without which none of our other rights can be fully realized.

So it all starts with the children who walk into their classrooms with their dreams, their potential and their trust. And, sometimes, with life experiences that can chill you to your core. America's teachers look beyond children's problems to see their promise, and they do all they can to cultivate their students' God-given potential. Why? Because teachers want to make a difference in children's lives—and because they know that education can transform young lives.

Maybe it's the history teacher in me—but this is an extraordinary moment for our country. We have just elected a president whose very victory brings us closer to fulfilling our founders' call for "a more perfect union," and who challenges all Americans to put aside our differences and assume a shared responsibility for our future.

We face very serious challenges—the financial crisis, the deepening recession, and their destructive consequences. Faced with declining tax revenues, state and local governments are cutting back on their most essential investment—educating the next generation. This disinvestment in education may help state and local governments' bottom lines this year. But it places our economy in a race to the bottom for years to come.

I propose that the nation reinvest—not disinvest—in education. By reinvesting, I don't just mean money. Yes, we must provide more funding. But we also must commit to policies and programs that challenge our schools, demand that they do the very best for all children, and ensure that the people who teach our students are given the tools they need.

I'm asking all of us—parents; teachers; school administrators; business, labor and community leaders; and elected officials to be responsible for our children. In the spirit of this extraordinary moment—and as a pledge of shared responsibility—I'll take the first step. 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.

Before you run out of the room to file your stories, hear me out.

Let's start with what should be incontrovertible: Every child deserves a world-class, well-rounded education; schools that are safe, clean and well-equipped; a rich and broad curriculum that feeds the mind and stirs the imagination; and teachers who are well-prepared in every school, in every classroom, every day.

But shared responsibility must also mean that we are willing to confront what seemingly divides us. And I will start by tackling the tough issues like teacher assignments, tenure and differentiated pay.

So, first, how do we ensure that our most vulnerable children enjoy the excellent education that all of America's children need now more than ever? It will require that every school in every community—especially low-performing schools—have high-quality teachers. The schools with children who have the greatest needs must not be staffed by teachers with the least experience.

We have some ideas about how to do this. First, money does matter. Mayor Bloomberg and I negotiated a 43 percent across-the-board increase for teachers from 2002 through 2008—and, as we say in New York, that “didn't hurt.” But, when you ask teachers what makes them willing to go to hard-to-staff schools and stay there, they mention two other essentials. As with parents and students, teachers want a safe and orderly environment. And teachers want to be supported so that, if they flounder, they aren't left to sink or swim.

So we eliminated forced transfers. And now, through the combination of this move, the salary increases, the attention to safety and the professional support—mainly through the Teacher Centers, a union-provided program—there are many more experienced teachers in New York City's high-poverty schools. Schools with 80-plus percent poverty levels now have the same proportion of experienced teachers as other schools. That goes a long way to evening the odds for kids who often start out with the deck stacked against them.

Now, we know we aren't the only people with good ideas. So we are working with our colleagues at the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and other allies to develop additional approaches that will work all across this country. And I'm delighted that the president of the Leadership Conference, Wade Henderson, is here with us this morning.

And then, of course, there's tenure. 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 our 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.

Some see tenure not as fairness, but as a fortress that protects incompetent teachers from ever being fired. Now, teachers are the first to say, “Let’s get incompetent teachers out of the classroom.” So let’s talk about creating a tenure process that both promotes excellence and ensures fairness.

This summer, the AFT national convention called upon our local unions to make the tenure process more rigorous. Through peer assistance and review, master teachers can help new colleagues learn their jobs, help struggling colleagues to do better, and counsel unsuccessful colleagues out of the profession. This system works well in Toledo, Cincinnati, Rochester and many other districts, and we want to put it to work in many more.

And, finally, is there a role for differentiated pay—the kind of pay that Mayor Bloomberg and some others call merit pay and still others call performance pay? Of course there is.

First, we have to pay all our teachers decent salaries, befitting the great responsibilities they assume from the first day they walk into a classroom.

And, then, let’s do more: Why not pay teachers more for taking on additional responsibilities? Why not pay teachers more for working in hard-to-staff schools or in subjects with shortages of qualified teachers? Why not pay teachers more for working with their fellow teachers for schoolwide excellence?

Once again, look at what we are doing in New York City. After increasing salaries across the board, Mayor Bloomberg and I reached agreement on a schoolwide performance-pay system in more than 200 schools. In a carefully crafted plan, schools could choose whether to opt in, and then could decide the distribution of the bonus, provided everyone in the school would share a portion of it.

I believe that the mayor wanted to test whether money paid in this form could increase student achievement. We wanted to see whether our instincts would prove correct that collaboration *and* strong professional support are indispensable to increasing student achievement. Both of our bets paid off: Student achievement already has improved so significantly in 128 of those schools that their staffs are getting bonuses. Even more promising—as of last week, teachers have weighed in at 191 of the 200 schools eligible to participate in this program next year. In 189 of these schools, teachers have voted to participate again, while only two schools have voted to opt out. These results reveal, if an innovation is collaborative and fair, teachers will embrace it—and it will succeed.

The idea of differentiated pay is not new to the AFT. Six years ago, the AFT convention approved the report of our Professional Compensation Committee, which I chaired. We embraced differentiated pay—not in isolation, but as a part of a successful reform effort. We put differentiated pay on the table, and we again welcome anyone prepared to engage in the discussion.

Yes, the AFT is prepared to take on these tough issues. But conventional wisdom suggests that our schools will improve simply by tackling these issues. Teachers know different. It takes much more. As a teacher, I encouraged my students to seek straight A’s. But the characteristics of successful school improvement just happen to be three C’s: collaboration, capacity and community.

Yes, successful schools have high standards, strong curricula and engaged students. But what makes it all work are the three C’s:

Collaboration means administrators, teachers and parents working together toward goals on which they all agree and with methods they all accept. Without the buy-in of teachers, student success is unlikely. With teachers’ buy-in, student success is unstoppable.

Capacity means recruiting and retaining great teachers, and providing the resources and support they need, such as ongoing high-quality professional development. That includes learning to effectively use data. We need to build up—not tear down—the people and places our students depend on to learn.

And community means that parents, and business, labor, religious, civic, and neighborhood groups and their leaders, fully commit to our public schools with their deeds and their dollars as well as their words. When the public schools really are the public’s schools—when parents really become involved in every aspect of school activity, and business leaders advocate for investing in education—they are set for success, not set up for failure.

Now, you may have noticed that, so far, I haven’t mentioned four controversial words—No Child Left Behind. Unfortunately, for the past eight years, No Child Left Behind 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.

Yes, we need strong and common standards. Yes, we need real and workable accountability. Yes, we need much more to help all our students and all our schools do their best. And, yes, we need Congress to pass and fully fund a bill that does all of that. And I am grateful that Chairman Miller is here today. But in the meantime, here are **10 smart investments** that Congress, governors, mayors and school districts can and should consider right now.

**First:** As President-elect Obama has said repeatedly, our first priority should be the first years of children’s lives. Educational research shows that most brain development takes place before age 6, and economic research shows that investments in high-quality early childhood education reap returns many times over. For instance, in Oklahoma, 91 percent of the school districts now have universal pre-K, with comprehensive social services and high standards for curricula. With more children ready for school, test scores for students are up by 16 percent after one year of participation. Let’s provide universal pre-K across this country, starting with low-income children.

**Second:** We must invest in preparing young people for high-skill, high-wage, high-technology “green jobs” and jobs in other promising fields. The AFT is ready to work with business and other unions, two-year and four-year colleges, and every level of government to offer young people the preparation they require for the jobs to which they aspire. Rigorous Career Training Education programs already have higher graduation rates than other academic programs. Together, we can broaden CTE to mean Careers in Technology and the Environment. I recently met with Gov. Joe Manchin of West Virginia to discuss expanding their career training programs. And we are fast-tracking our partnership with them to do so. I am delighted that first lady Gayle Manchin, who serves on West Virginia’s state board of education, has joined us this morning.

**Third:** Yes, we must keep helping the students with the greatest academic as well as economic needs. But we also must help the high-achieving students from low-income households who, with extra support, will become our nation’s leaders. These strivers need Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate opportunities. So let’s make this kind of coursework, as well as coaching and mentoring, and access to early college courses, and opportunities for independent research, available in every high school. We must not allow a declining economy to foreclose on the dreams of strivers from struggling families.

**Fourth:** We must expand the variety of high-quality school choices within the public system. In fact, we have developed two union-run charter schools in my hometown. In Boston, the school district, the union and the mayor’s office have collaborated on a network of pilot schools—small, theme-based schools that are highly successful. There are many more notable examples, from the

Grove Patterson Academy in Toledo to the Hamline K-8 school in Chicago. What they all have in common is a focus on collaboration, capacity and community—and they succeed with a union contract in place. For once, let's learn from our experiences and spread the successes of what works within our public schools.

**Fifth:** We need a laser-like focus on turning around low-performing schools. For more than 10 years, the AFT has conducted national institutes where teams of teachers and administrators come together to develop their own redesign plans. Here's one example: For several years, our union has worked with the ABC Unified School District, just outside Los Angeles, to turn around the low-performing, high-poverty schools there. And every school has improved. For instance, at Hawaiian Elementary School in the ABC District—where 100 percent of the students are eligible for free school lunches—test scores have risen consistently for seven straight years. When asked how they did this, teachers and principals point to a strong curriculum—and lots of teamwork.

**Sixth:** Especially with a declining economy, we need to promote community schools that serve the neediest children by bringing together all the services they and their families need. I'm thinking of schools that are open all day and after school; high schools that help students earn diplomas by allowing them to sign up for morning, afternoon or evening classes; and schools offering services from child care and counseling, to dental and medical care, to English language instruction and GED programs—all of which improve students' educational outcomes and general well-being.

**Seventh:** We need physical environments where teachers can teach and children can learn. The federal Department of Education has found that the condition of 43 percent of school buildings "interferes with the delivery of instruction." The AFT is working with the building trades unions to find new ways for the skilled workers who build so much of America's infrastructure to work with their local school districts. Rebuilding and rewiring our schools are important ways to boost the economy and put people to work.

**Eighth:** Let's create a National Teacher Induction Network—to support new teachers and help them stay. With the baby boom generation retiring, we need a cadre of career teachers. Right now, the most common reason we lose teachers in the first five years is lack of support. Let's enable their seasoned and successful colleagues to mentor them. These master teachers will receive salary increases, making teaching a career with opportunities for advancement.

**Ninth:** Let's create an Online Teacher Resource Network: We propose partnerships with IT companies and others to develop an online research network for the nation's teachers with information on curriculum, lesson plans, and primary and secondary source documents—print and electronic—to enhance their teaching. Then, teachers could focus on their craft instead of reinventing curriculum and lessons. The AFT did this, immediately after the election, when we launched a set of lesson plans, resources and links to source material, entitled "2008 Historic Election: A Teachable Moment."

**Tenth:** Let's demand a well-rounded education for every student. The flawed implementation of No Child Left Behind makes standardized test score competition the be-all and end-all in too many schools. Huge investments of time and money in "test prep" have deprived our students, particularly the least affluent, of a well-rounded education. Yes, reading and math skills are essential. But all students also should be learning a second language, getting physically fit, learning about the world beyond their neighborhoods and experiencing the arts.

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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. We have just created the AFT Innovation Fund to support local union-led efforts to improve public schools all across this country. The AFT already has committed \$1 million to this effort. This is one more way in which we are sharing responsibility for improving our schools and increasing student achievement. Soon, we hope to announce grants from some of the major foundations engaged in this work. I'm delighted that former Gov. Tom Vilsack and Barbara Byrd-Bennett, who are here, will co-chair the advisory board of the Innovation Fund, and that Adam Urbanski, the reform-minded president of the AFT local in Rochester, N.Y., has agreed to run it.

So let me go back to where I started: This is a rare moment when—for better or for worse—Americans will make choices that will shape our children's and grandchildren's futures for decades to come.

Will we disinvest in our schools, demean our teachers, and deny our young people the educational opportunities that they deserve and the new economy demands? Or will we make the investments to recruit and retain great teachers, rebuild and rewire our schools, and inform and inspire our young people to aim higher and achieve more than any generation in history?

Regrettably, we are in the throes of a perfect storm that threatens to engulf education in this country. At least 41 states are suffering from budget shortfalls for this fiscal year—and these problems will get worse. The tumbling economy is taking a terrible toll on the property, sales and income tax revenues that provide the majority of support for our public schools.

This is scary. Students are losing after-school and extracurricular programs as well as tutoring and important electives that help them catch up or deepen their knowledge. School systems are cutting back on the proven and promising programs that are improving student achievement. They are putting off purchases of up-to-date textbooks and state-of-the-art technology. As in the past, the school districts with the greatest needs are facing the worst budget problems and making the most severe cuts.

I know these are tough times that require tough choices. But, 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. Our young people are coming of age in an economy that demands ever-increasing levels of knowledge, skill and adaptability. They will spend their lives competing with workers from economies the world over. If America continues to cut back education and training, there will be cheers of joy from our economic rivals, from Beijing to Bangalore.

The choice is up to all of us. Quality education can't be achieved on the cheap. But disinvesting in education in the long term is far more costly.

Now, let me conclude with something that runs deep in my heart and soul. In the weeks before the election, I visited 17 states, speaking with—and listening to—teachers in communities of all kinds. I heard teachers speak of their commitment to their kids. But I also heard the anxiety in their voices—the fear that budget cutbacks will increase class sizes to unmanageable levels, put the brakes on initiatives that are improving their schools, and eliminate programs that help disruptive kids get a second chance.

But even more striking, I heard their despair about their work being demeaned by politicians, the press and even the people who run their school systems. Teachers know their students deserve the best possible education. Teachers know they're giving it all they've got. And teachers know they too often get blamed when—for whatever reason—our children slip, or trip, or don't succeed.

And what are the costs of this disrespect? 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.

President-elect Obama understands this. During the campaign, he said that he will work for education reform—and we applauded him for it. And he said repeatedly that education reform must be done *with* teachers, not done *to* teachers.

Now, some will say, “We love teachers. But we need to take on the teachers’ unions.” This blame game may make headlines for public officials, provocative pieces for pundits, and books for publishing houses. But the blame game won’t improve one more school, educate one more child, or recruit and retain one more outstanding teacher.

So let me say to the nation’s school administrators, public policymakers and opinion leaders: Before you “take on the teachers’ unions,” think of whom you’re taking on.

Think of a teacher who is staying up past midnight to prepare her lesson plan. She deserves your support, not your scorn.

Think of a teacher who is paying for equipment out of his own pocket so his students can conduct science experiments that they otherwise couldn’t do. He needs more resources, not more red tape.

Think of a teacher who takes her students to a “We the People” debating competition over the weekend, instead of spending time with her own family. She doesn’t need to be lectured about teaching being more than a job—she lives it.

And think of a teacher who is spending his evening marching in the rain to protest budget cuts. He isn’t your adversary. He is your ally.

These are the people the AFT represents. Make no mistake about it—when you attack us, you attack them.

We stand at a turning point in the American journey. For the sake of our children, 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 the responsibility that history has handed us.

These are the tests of our times. Together, we can pass these tests with flying colors. The nation’s teachers stand ready. Are you?

I hope that you are. I thank you for hearing me out this morning. And I am eager to answer your questions.