

Saying Reforms Fail Most Pupils, Shanker Argues for a 'New Type' of Teaching Unit

By Lynn Olson

WASHINGTON—Arguing that most education-reform measures are resulting in “more of the same,” the president of the American Federation of Teachers last week outlined a plan that would enable small groups of teachers and parents to create their own innovative schools within existing school buildings.

Such a step is needed, the union leader, Albert Shanker, asserted in a speech before the National Press Club here, because the reform movement is “bypassing about 80 percent of the students in this country.”

“Eighty percent of students do not learn in traditional settings,” he contended. “They just don’t fit.”

Mr. Shanker disputed Secretary of Education William J. Bennett’s contention that the reform movement has been “highjacked and held for ransom” by education bureaucrats and special-interest groups.

In fact, the A.F.T. president asserted, the “top down” approach to school reform—typified by state legislation and mandates—“is the most widely implemented set of reforms within my memory.”

The problem, he said, is that “there is not

one shred of evidence that they work for more than about 10 to 20 percent of our students.” Simply requiring students to meet more and higher standards, Mr. Shanker argued, “will not do anything for those students who are not able to sit still and listen, who are not able to read on their own” and who, when asked a question, “are humiliated in front of all of their colleagues in class, because they never get it right.”

A ‘Fragile’ Movement

Mr. Shanker suggested that there is a second, “very fragile” school-reform movement occurring that is directly concerned with helping all students learn. But the number of schools and districts engaged in such a “bottom up” approach, he maintained, can be counted “on the fingers of both hands.”

“The innovative reform plans in Dade County, Fla.; Hammond, Ind.; Rochester, N.Y.; Pittsburgh, Pa; and a few other districts are few and far between,” he said.

Mr. Shanker said that his proposal would enable the number of innovative school sites to increase from a relative handful to as many as 3,000, by creating a “mechanism which will give teachers and students and parents the right to opt for a new type of school.”

A New Mechanism

Under his plan, local unions and their school boards would create a policymaking body—such as a joint panel of union and district representatives—to which any group of six or more teachers could submit a proposal for a “school-within-a-school.”

If approved, each such school would receive the same per-pupil allocation as that for other students within the building. Entire schools could also apply.

The district would agree “to protect and leave the school alone for at least 5 to 10 years,” as long as the teachers continued to teach there, parents continued to enroll their children, and no “precipitous” decline in educational performance resulted.

In return, Mr. Shanker recommended, the organizers of a proposed school would have to accept conditions such as these:

- An assurance that it would have no adverse effects on the other teachers and students within the school or school district;
- The approval of the principal and other teachers within the school;
- A guarantee of the right of teachers and parents to choose whether or not to participate;
- A guarantee to accept students who are representative of the student body as a whole in ability and background, and to conform to other civil-rights requirements;
- Agreement to use multiple instructional techniques—such as team teaching, cooperative learning, and the use of new technologies—that recognize that all students learn at different rates and in different ways;
- Adoption of a plan for “participative management” or joint decision-making within the school, including opportunities for teachers to consult with each other and to share ideas;
- A guarantee of time for teachers to work with individual students, and to keep detailed records of the successes and failures of the program;
- Attention to creativity and to other aspects of intelligence beyond the acquisition of basic skills.

- Adoption of clear goals that are announced in advance to the community, both in terms of what they are and how they will be measured.

‘No Magic Bullet’

The union president said he was placing the emphasis on individual schools and groups of educators because “it’s almost impossible to

change an entire school system.”

“There is no magic bullet,” he added. But he predicted that if such innovative programs work, “other teachers are going to say, ‘Hey, that looks pretty good to me. We’d like to try it next year.’”

“We are engaged in a search,” Mr. Shanker argued. “We need to admit that we really do not know how to reach 80 percent of these kids. There is nobody who has really ever educated all of them.”

“Just as doctors are honored because they tried something and it didn’t work,” he added, “we need to honor those educators who try something,” even if it fails.

Mr. Shanker acknowledged that such schools would require support from all levels of government and from the private sector in order to waive existing regulations and to provide limited funds for such activities as teacher training, conferences, and the introduction of new technologies.

But he insisted that, by and large, such schools would not cost more money. Smaller sub-units within schools might even save money on administration, he asserted. And he predicted that accountability within such schools would increase, because teams of teachers working together would have a greater stake in each other’s performance.

The reactions of educators immediately following Mr. Shanker’s speech were generally positive.

The idea of a school-within-a-school “is not new,” said Keith Geiger, vice president of the rival National Education Association. “But it is a very intriguing idea to promote it at the national level.”

“I think the more experimentation that we can get going,” he added, “the better off we will be in education.”

Gary Marx, associate executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, said the proposal was “sure to stimulate discussion in many school districts . . . and discussion is always healthy.”

But he cautioned that the steps needed to carry out Mr. Shanker’s plans could “run into some bumps in the road.”

And Lew Armistead, director of public information for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, questioned whether money would be available to implement Mr. Shanker’s ideas.

“Resources are going to need to be found,” he said, “and I don’t think people are going to be knocking people over to provide them.”

But, he added, “the idea of asking teachers and parents to buy into the concept of taking risks to improve schools is great.”