PS for 1/11/90

Tell it Like it is, Al Shanker

"American education as it exists today will not be tolerated by the American people, by our business community, by our policy leaders for more than another few years." That was said, not by some so-called "enemy" of public schools, but by Al Shanker, longtime president of the nation's second largest teachers union and someone whose support of public education cannot be questioned.

Shanker made a remarkable speech at a conference of teachers and school administrators sponsored by the Gates Foundation in Denver in September. It deserves national attention because he came right out and explained what a disastrous job the public schools are doing and urged "drastic change."

The change that Shanker is recommending can be summed up in one word that strikes terror into the hearts of liberals generally, and the National Education Association (NEA) and the entire education establishment in particular: *competition!*

Shanker doesn't mean a cushy, friendly type of competition. He means a system in which there are winners and losers, and losing means going out of business. "In every other field of life, where there's competition, if you're running a lousy show, and if you don't change, you die."

Shanker also favors choice. He said, "we can no longer compel parents to send their kids to a given school."

We've all heard for several years about the high percentage of illiterates and dropouts. For example, Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos recently told the American Medical Association House of Delegates that, because of our 27 million illiterates, "we are in danger of becoming the world's only fully industrialized Third World nation."

But Al Shanker addressed the problem of how badly educated are the "successful" kids, that is, the ones who stay in public schools, graduate, and go to college.

He asked, how many of our 17 and 18-year-olds are able to read editorials and articles in our better newspapers and magazines, write an essay of several pages,

and solve a two-step mathematical problem? He says it's only 3 to 6 percent. That means 94 percent of public school graduates canNOT do those things!

How many can write an "adequate" letter, such as one- or two-paragraph letter of application to a supermarket manager conveying the idea that you are applying for a hob, and allowing for some spelling and grammatical errors? Shanker says that only 20 percent of high school graduates can do this, which means that 80 percent canNOT even write a paragraph conveying a single idea.

Shanker compared the performance of U.S. schools with foreign countries. He says that 90 to 95 percent of American students who go to college would not be accepted in any college anywhere else in the world. They get into college here only because of our relatively low standards compared to all other countries.

Then Shanker directed his attention to the low quality of the teachers. He said that the mathematics test given to teachers has the same questions as are given to 6th grade pupils – and that the passing grade for teachers is 65 percent, the same as for a sixth grader.

Yet, despite the elementary level of the test and the low passing grade allowed, 30 to 40 percent of prospective teachers fail. Many are hired anyway because of the shortage of teachers, and many because they passed with 65 percent.

Yet Shanker, who ought to know because of his union members teach in schools all over the country, said that only a fraction of one percent of school personnel admit that there is anything wrong with public schools. Our primary task is to get people to realize that there is a problem.

First among the factors that destroyed public education, according to Shanker, is that "we have a Soviet system of education in this country." By "Soviet," he said he means a system in which you are treated exactly the same if you fail as if you succeed. That's what lack of competition does, and that's why competition is so desperately needed.

Second, Shanker explained that one of the major differences between American and foreign schools is that "we spend half of our money on bureaucracy, whereas the other schools in the world don't spend more than 20 percent." We have one teacher to every 25 kids, but on supervisor for every six teachers.

Third, Shanker said that every American teacher knows that, “at the end of this year, at the end of next year, and finally with the SATs, my kids are never going to have to write an essay. They’re never going to have to organize their thoughts.” The tests we use, Shanker said, “are very objective, but they measure things that are hardly worth measuring.”

The remedy for the public school debacle will be painful to the entrenched bureaucracy: choice, competition, cut the bureaucracy, and change the tests. But the public is demanding it today.