

What Matters Most

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Tough Liberal

Any discussion of the history of public schools in the 20th century would be incomplete without mention of the debt owed to Albert Shanker. The legendary American Federation of Teachers president, who died in 1997, was instrumental in giving teachers a voice and making teacher unions the influential forces in education they are today. Yet his role is often misunderstood.

Fortunately Richard D. Kahlenberg's new biography of this complex and powerful leader — *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* — helps set the record straight. Kahlenberg shines a light on Shanker as a brilliant innovator and advocate of bold education reforms. Indeed, because many of today's so-called education reformers have contorted his common-sense ideas and made them unrecognizable, the book reinforced for me the urgency of keeping Shanker's legacy alive.

When Al began teaching in East Harlem in the early 1950s, he was appalled by how he and his colleagues were treated. At that time, teachers could have made more money washing cars. Pregnancy was forbidden. Teachers were routinely reprimanded for untidy classrooms but offered no support or feedback on instruction. Even with tenure, a due process concept that long predates teacher unionism, they were often exploited by administrators.

Shanker's role in the creation of the United Federation of Teachers (the NYC affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers), his fight for collective bargaining rights and his efforts to elevate the teaching profession won teachers' trust. That trust enabled him to take them — and public education — in new directions.

Shanker embraced and fought for high educational standards, testing and accountability. He popularized the idea of charter schools (teacher-led schools freed from the traditional system's bureaucracy) in order to foster new educational strategies. He backed a controversial proposal for peer review to improve teachers' instructional skills and assist in weeding out teachers who should not be in the classroom.

In later years, Shanker became disillusioned with the charter school movement he helped to inspire,

feeling that it had changed from a teacher-led hub of new ideas into an increasingly anti-teacher union, for-profit enterprise.

Sadly, over the years, many of Shanker's bold ideas have been pulled apart and twisted, leaving us with a system characterized by extremes, where the "reformers" blame teacher unions for all that is wrong with our schools. In their view, public schools should be run like old-time factories where principals rule, teachers are cogs in an assembly line and children are constantly tested for quality control.

At the core of all of Shanker's ideas for education reform was one unifying theme: Schools are places where children learn to become active, engaged citizens in their democracy and where teachers must be free to exercise professional judgment to do what is best for the children in their care.

That fervent belief in democracy was the basis of his life's work with organized labor and public schools. To him, both were the engines for equality in our society.

Here in New York, we are working not only to keep Shanker's legacy alive, but to build on it. We fight hard for salaries that allow teachers to live middle-class lives, raise families and plan for the future. And we fight equally hard for more resources for urban public schools and for our neediest children. We support rigorous academic standards, but not the current fixation on test scores, which has meant sacrificing a rich, diverse curriculum in favor of repeated drilling in reading and math. We even joined the "new" charter school movement — not only to create great schools, but to bring the concept back to what Al Shanker originally envisioned.

Shanker's fight for professionalism and dignity attracted good teachers to our classrooms, and those teachers, particularly when they are empowered to implement the reforms he advocated, have given us better public schools.

Albert Shanker's most important lesson is that strong teacher unions and innovative educational reforms are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, if teachers are to speak up on behalf of the best education for their students, they must first have a voice.



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