When I was growing up, I lived in a very poor community in Coney Island. On the edge was another community, called Sea Gate. Sea Gate was, and still is, a middle-class enclave, cut off from the rest of us, literally by a gate and security guards. You needed special identification then, and still do, to get through.

At school, where there was strict tracking, I was the only kid in my class from outside the gate. None of my friends from my own street were in my class, but I did make friends with my classmates. I visited them and saw how they lived; they had big houses, their own rooms, big kitchens and separate dining rooms, where tables were set for dinner in fine ways that I had never seen.

From early on, the difference between the haves and the have-nots made a big impression on me. Despite those differences, however, I got the same education as those richer kids did. These experiences showed me that education is the great equalizer and the engine for opportunity. I went on to Brooklyn College, got involved in the civil rights movement, and when I started teaching, union activity was just a natural. It was the beginning of a lifetime commitment to education and trade unionism.

I tell this story not to boast of my personal success as the “kid from Coney Island” who made good. Rather, it is to show the heart of what a strong union, a strong public education system, and a strong labor movement are all about. It illustrates the challenges that the AFT must take up as we enter a crucial time. Despite unprecedented prosperity in this country, the gap between rich and poor has widened and deepened. And even though strong majorities of parents and
citizens still believe in supporting and improving public schools, we are seeing more attempts nationwide to dismantle public education. Many of the enemies of public education are also leading efforts to privatize public services, limit access to colleges and universities and eliminate tenure. They would also deny access to quality health care, destroy employee rights and collective bargaining and silence working families and their unions.

As I think about the attacks on our union and the institutions in which we work, I know that without a strong voice, we face a different way of life, a future less bright. It's a way of life that cuts many Americans off from universal and free public education, from affordable, quality health care, from essential public services and much more that bind us together as a society with a commitment to the common good. In short, many Americans, including many of those we teach or serve or nurture or care for in the places where we work, are in danger of being left “outside the gate.”

— 1996-98 AFT Officers Report, Sandy’s first after becoming AFT president in 1997

Al Shanker suggested that I apply for the [UFT] field representative position, which I went home and thought about because I had just gotten my high school English license and I wanted to teach English, because that was in line with my goal of becoming a writer.

— Oral history interview, 1986
Opportunity and a high school diploma are synonymous. In the past, when the dropout rate was actually much higher, a high school dropout could get a blue collar job and live a decent life. Today, three-quarters of our nation’s dropouts end up living in poverty. The enormous change in our society from a manufacturing to a service economy, combined with the easy access to big bucks from peddling drugs, means that a kid who drops out of school drops into an abyss—and possibly into a snake pit of drugs, crime, prison or even mental, emotional and physical illness. When that happens to young people in the numbers it is now happening, our very future as a society is threatened.

-- CitySchools column, New York Teacher, May 23, 1988

Parental support and involvement is essential to school success. Without it, without the real school improvement which requires parental involvement, our schools will not be able to build and maintain the support they need to keep them viable.

-- UFT Spring Conference, April 28, 1990

The perception of what [higher] education is and why it is valuable has undergone an alteration—and a coarsening. Instead of educating the whole person, intellectually and morally as well as professionally, we now see a nearly exclusive focus on preparing students to earn a living. This limits the students and robs our society of people who can think beyond their own narrow area of expertise—or who care beyond the circle of their immediate lives.

-- Speech at 25th anniversary of UUP/SUNY, May 1998

The “defunding” of higher education has... made many families think twice about whether their children can afford a college degree. Cutting off opportunity opens the gap between the haves and have-nots.

-- 1996-98 AFT Officers Report
We’ve had successes in turning around failing schools, but it takes time and experimentation and exploration. In education, you often have to do something for children in many different ways before you hit on a method that “clicks.” But it seems that in education, unlike science and medicine, you’re not permitted to fail in an attempt to succeed… Not every turn at bat is going to lead to a home run—but often learning what doesn’t work is as important as discovering what does. Where teachers are allowed to take risks it usually comes out for the better… We have this adage in education about how “everything is doomed to succeed.” That’s because educators are made to be afraid to admit that something isn’t working. (Remember whole language vs. phonics? The new math?)

--- CitySchools column, New York Teacher, Nov. 15, 1995

Put simply and starkly, I believe that those of us responsible for public education must never defend or try to perpetuate a school to which we would not send our own children.

--- Where We Stand, October 1997

As a union, we know that the question is no longer “whither public education?” We can handle that. We know that big changes are necessary, and we’re ready, willing, and able to make them, even if it means doing things very differently… so long as it carries forward the cherished ideals of public education and our democracy, so long as it helps this nation make good on them. But the question we’re hearing isn’t “whither public education” but whether—a question never raised before in America. That it could be asked at all is stunning. That the answer could be “no” has consequences too terrible to contemplate.

--- AFT Convention, July 17, 1998
Ultimately, at the heart of everything we do and have done, is this fundamental question: What is best for the student, the child, the patient or the ordinary citizen that we serve? In our schools, doing what is best for the child is ensuring that we have high academic standards; a good, solid curriculum; a safe building and an orderly environment; well-qualified and trained teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff; and adequate resources. It also means that we have to identify and push for “what works” in our classrooms—solid, research-based solutions that lead to higher academic achievement. We are making progress.

-- 1996-98 AFT Officers Report

Supply shortages are a way of life in the Educational Twilight Zone … [Take] JHS 72 in Queens, where Ira Goldberg is teaching orchestra without instruments—hoping that a recently ordered supply of strings will make it to the school before the kids graduate. Oh yes, JHS 72 just happens to be the Count Basie Junior High School.

-- CitySchools Educational Twilight Zone column, New York Teacher, Oct. 16, 1989

At a Bronx elementary school… the principal instituted the use of a… “Request Form for Permission to Come Behind the Counter in the Main Office”… [It] required teachers to state specifically their reason for daring to venture behind the counter. Five possible choices… [ranged] from “to see the pupil accounting secretary” to “other (be specific).” We understand that a request form… to enter the school is in the works. Why wait to make a decision until they reach the counter?

-- CitySchools column, New York Teacher, Nov. 10, 1986
“Bayard became a very important mentor... We really believed we were going to make a better world; we were going to lick this thing and everything was going to be fine. I was prepared to die...”

– Oral history, 1986, speaking of civil rights leader Bayard Rustin recruiting Brooklyn College students to integrate schools in 1956

During college, my friends and I, including Eleanor [Holmes Norton], joined the Harlem Congress of Racial Equality, CORE... We were trained in [non-violent] civil disobedience and passive resistance. We spent weeks sitting in at the construction site of the new Harlem hospital... to force the integration of that workforce... [We] also did some foolish things—like lying down in the street in front of a bulldozer...

This New York girl got on a bus every weekend to integrate the Howard Johnsons up and down Maryland's Route 40, and I have some vivid memories of being herded about by cops and dogs and being shoved along with many others into a stuffy, dirty Baltimore jail...

The most dicey, and probably more than a little foolish, thing... was [to] go around Harlem one day with U-Haul trucks and pick up garbage that had been left in the streets for weeks—old mattresses and box springs, broken furniture, rotting piles of newspapers... [At] 5 p.m. we drove onto the Triborough Bridge and dumped [it]... and stopped the traffic. “You’re going home to nice neighborhoods,” our statement said. “We just want you to take a look at how poor people are forced to live.” But the working people on their way home didn’t appreciate the logic or the traffic jam... So they started to leave their cars and advance on us (we were sitting amidst the garbage, passive resistance mode). Fortunately, the cops got to us first...

I tell this with some amusement, of course... to explain that though we were scared, and perhaps sometimes mistaken, we were prepared for beatings and even worse for the cause of equality and justice.

– AFT Convention, July 14, 2004

In planning the 1963 March on Washington, both Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph understood the critical link between the civil rights movement and the labor movement and rightly recognized the importance of economic equality as well as racial equality. That was why Randolph insisted that the event be the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." In the years since then, tremendous progress has been made, but we must be vigilant. Human rights may be God-given, but they are never guaranteed... In our struggles, sometime we get knocked down, but we never stop fighting—never.

– Remarks at AFT headquarters for the 40th anniversary of the march, August 2003

MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY
The labor movement, through blood, sweat, and tears—including the tears of a lot of crybaby bosses—brought us the weekend, paid vacations, health insurance, pension plans and the 40-hour week, with extra pay for overtime work. And it was the labor movement that was the prime mover behind creating the public school system, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid and civil rights and women’s rights legislation.

By advancing these ideas—by fighting hard for them, and by struggling through the tough, basic work of raising wages in the industries we organized—unions did something even more fundamental and far-reaching: We helped working people lift themselves into the first middle class majority in human history. When labor is strong, America enjoys shared prosperity and national unity; but when we’re weak, the economy stagnates, and our society polarizes further and further between the haves and the have-nots.

—AFL-CIO conference, Chicago, June 2003
The future of America’s children is tied to the future of labor’s fight for working families; and even if you think you’re never going to work in a place or a profession where unions are active, you should still want an America with a strong and vibrant labor movement. And, because the ultra-competitive new economy has a way of turning even the most skilled jobs into temporary positions and even the most highly educated people into disposable parts, you may need a union yourself one day.

— Chicago-Kent College of Law, March 2000

So often criticized and beleaguered, the vast majority of public employees are dedicated to their work and dedicated to improving the quality of the services they provide.

— 1996-98 AFT Officers Report

Public Employees
Public employees are being asked to do more with less while decision-makers tinker with our nation’s safety net—public services... AFT Public Employees... [are] mobilizing workers, forming coalitions to fight cuts, stepping up political and legislative action, offering alternative, revenue-generating plans... and bringing into the public debate the expensive practice of contracting out public sector jobs... We have turned a challenging situation into an opportunity to influence debate.

— 2004 AFT Public Employees calendar
I spent a day in a large urban teaching hospital watching nurses and other health professionals save lives... I saw miraculous modern technology and nurses doing miraculous work. But wherever I went, I heard stories of understaffing, low pay, exhausting hours and mandatory overtime and, most alarmingly, nurses who love their profession but are planning to leave it.

It is ludicrous to recruit people into a profession, prepare them to uphold its standards and then make their work environment so poor it sends them running from that profession at high speed. Yet that is what's happening in nursing today. It's time to make sure that hard-working nurses get the support they deserve—so they can provide us and our loved ones with the care we need.

-- Where We Stand, in Healthwire, May/June 2001

The health-care crisis is an incredibly complex problem, and there are no easy answers. But we can solve it, and one place to start would be to insist that our government invest in making decent health care affordable for working families, rather than provide more tax breaks for the rich. If we continue to put off dealing with this critical issue, we will soon become a nation in which good health care is a privilege only the wealthy can afford—everyone else will just have to hope that they don’t become seriously ill or injured. For a nation as affluent as ours, that’s appalling.

-- Where We Stand, March 2005
What kind of country will we become? Which ideals and commitments will we carry into the future? Will the greatest democratic experiment in the history of the world—an experiment that created the greatest middle class and the greatest equality of opportunity on earth—will it survive this transformation or will it succumb? Will the new market economy bring new freedom and prosperity to our children? Or will its cold, impersonal forces be allowed to grind up their future?

Will America act to temper the brutal aspects of this change? Will human dignity, hope, and the conditions necessary for a civic society to thrive be preserved, even as we embrace change? Or will we continue to allow the neglect that millions of children already suffer—and thereby sacrifice everything we ever stood for and strived for? These may sound like abstract questions. But they are not…

This nation cannot withstand an end to public education, public services, decent health care, some measure of job stability, family life, political participation for all, safety nets, and security. That is no society at all; that is a jungle. And that is what unions, this union, protect against… Today, it is more necessary than ever because there are people with unlimited resources who want to dismantle government—not make it work more effectively… They want to end an effective voice for ordinary Americans in the political process. And since we and the rest of labor stand in the way… they want to dismantle us.

– AFT Convention, July 17, 1998
History teaches us that the greatest threats to freedom and security arise from anti-democratic regimes and totalitarian ideologies. We know that students who go to school under repressive regimes are not exposed to democratic ideas in either their textbooks or classroom discussions.

The events of the last few months make painfully clear that we cannot take the survival or spread of democracy for granted. The central drama of modern history continues to be the struggle to establish, preserve and extend democratic values—at home and abroad. And as the inhumanity of terrorist acts demonstrates, these values do not come naturally. Devotion to human dignity and freedom, to equal rights, to social and economic justice, to the rule of law, to civility and truth, to tolerance of diversity, to mutual assistance, to personal and civic responsibility, to self-restraint and self-respect—must be learned and practiced.

-- Where We Stand, May/June 2002

The end of communism, the defeat of apartheid and the victories over Latin-American military regimes were triumphs of ordinary citizens and workers who organized to defeat repressive regimes at great risk to themselves and their families. In every case, teachers have been some of the most important foot soldiers for freedom—and AFT has been involved throughout these years...

The strength of democracy, here and overseas, is important to us, like the rest of the free labor movement. We want for workers abroad the same things we want for ourselves—a decent job with dignity, the right to organize, the right to a quality education for all, freedom of association and speech—all of which require a democratic society. Without democracy, neither we nor any other free trade union can exist.

-- Introducing Szeto Wah, a founder of Hong Kong’s independent teachers union and recipient of the AFT’s Bayard Rustin Human Rights Award, at AFT Convention, July 2002
and in public service, the nation owes its gratitude.

Sometimes this is forgotten, however, in the rough and tumble of partisan politics... Working families have become the target of ill-conceived, hurtful policies. A massive tax giveaway for the wealthy has plunged this nation into record deficits... Funding for and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, adopted by Congress in 2001 with bipartisan support and offering hope for our nation’s most disadvantaged students, fell far short of what was promised. Overtime-pay rights for millions of working families—including thousands of our members—are set to disappear... The overhaul of Medicare to provide prescription drug coverage... was little more than a windfall for drug and insurance companies...

There is a great deal of work still to be done. But I am optimistic... [We’re] stronger than ever... We will never give up, and our future is secured by the dedication of our members.

— 2002-2004 AFT Officers Report, Sandy’s last
like you, when I want to make the future less abstract, I think about children. I think especially about my extraordinary 5-year-old grandson, Tatum. So maybe the best way I can... illustrate my proposal about tomorrow is to talk about the public school in Brooklyn, N.Y., that Tatum goes to today.

It was organized by teachers... within the NYC public school system, with management and the union helping it to flourish. There's an enlightened principal, and teachers, paraprofessionals and other school staff all have voice in how the school is organized, run, and staffed.

Tatum's school reaches even higher than the standards set by the district and state; but school staff have the flexibility to figure out how to help their students reach high standards. The district provides resources for professional development, but the staff work together with the district... [to assure it] is geared toward their students' needs.

Tatum just graduated from kindergarten. The school, like most schools, doesn't have the money for small class size across the grades, so the staff organized... smaller classes in the early childhood years. They sure could make good use of President Clinton's early childhood class-size funding!

Tatum is not poor, but many of the kids in his school are; the school is ethnically diverse, too... Teachers who originally organized Tatum's school had a plan to make full inclusion work, so special education students are fully integrated... Not only is Tatum doing wonderfully well—Tatum would do well anywhere—but so are his schoolmates. The staff works very hard, they keep parents informed and involved, and they love what they do.

— AFT QuEST Conference, July 9, 1999
This booklet was produced with love and dedication by the officers and staff of the American Federation of Teachers and the United Federation of Teachers.