

**Testimony of Randi Weingarten,
President, American Federation of Teachers,**

Before the House Committee on Education and Labor

May 4, 2010

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Kline and committee members, I am Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Thank you for inviting me to testify on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), particularly as it relates to teachers.

Before I begin, I would like to thank Chairman Miller for his leadership and commitment to passing the Local Jobs for Main Street Act, a bill that will help local communities preserve jobs for educators, avoid increasing class sizes and shortening school days, and maintain core academic programs that help the students who need them most. The school budget cut situation is devastating, the worst it has been in anyone's memory. Current projections show that by the end of this school year as many as 300,000 educators nationwide will be laid off because of the dire financial situation facing states and localities. We are doing all that we can to reverse this, and I know many of you are, too. Toward that end, and as part of Teacher Appreciation Week, the AFT is launching a campaign—"Pink Hearts, Not Pink Slips"—to draw attention to these layoffs and the devastating impact they will have on our students and on our schools and communities.

"Pink Hearts, Not Pink Slips" is our way to raise awareness among parents, the public and the media about what school districts and colleges are facing now and will continue to face in the next school year. We are encouraging as many people as possible to wear a pink heart on May 4 to help spread our message. I have brought a bag of buttons—enough for everyone on the committee.

I can tell you firsthand that these cuts are serious. I recently visited California, where the cuts will be nothing short of catastrophic for the state's public school students. I visited El Dorado Elementary School in San Francisco, where 13 of 20 teachers received layoff notices in March. The teachers there were most concerned about what will happen to the

school and its students who are low-income, if it loses so many teachers. I was also proud to join more than 10,000 teachers, school employees, parent and community groups on the last leg of their 48-day, 365-mile “March for California’s Future.” Like the teachers at El Dorado, the marchers weren’t thinking about themselves, they were marching for children’s futures. Finally, during a visit to New Mexico in early April, I participated in a town hall meeting in Albuquerque. Our leaders and members there echoed many of the fears and concerns expressed in California about budget cuts and their impact on teachers and students.

There's another point I'd like to make. Every child should have access to a great public education. And all public schools—whether they are charter schools (where 3 percent of our public school children are educated) or non-charter public schools (where 97 percent of these children are educated)—should have high standards and real accountability. But it seems to me that the weight of our efforts, our resources and our support should be on the schools that educate 97 percent of our kids.

Students will not do well in school if they are not taught by well-prepared and engaged teachers. At the same time, neither students nor their teachers can succeed unless (1.) the teachers are supported by competent administrators who understand not simply the value but also the necessity of collaboration; (2.) the environment in which they are asked to learn and teach is safe, appropriately staffed and equipped; and (3.) there is shared responsibility—not top-down accountability.

The AFT firmly believes in and is committed to the proposition that high standards and expectations must be set for students and teachers. We know, however, that it makes no sense to simply set standards. We have to provide students and teachers with the tools they need to help meet those standards. That is why the last movement to create high standards and expectations didn’t work as well as any of our leaders and members would have wanted. And as the agreements in the District of Columbia and New Haven, Conn., suggest, collective bargaining can be an important vehicle to securing these tools.

It is often said that great teachers are not born, they are made. Despite the frequency with which this is said, our nation’s approach to teacher quality suggests that we believe the converse is true—that great teachers are born fully prepared for the role. The truth of the matter is that good teaching is an art built upon a firm foundation. We must begin by making sure teachers receive good preparation in the schools that *they* attend. This is something the AFT addressed more than 12 years ago in our report, “Building a Profession.” Graduation from teacher education or alternative certification programs should not be considered the end of teachers’ training. New teachers need time to develop the skills and experience necessary for independent practice in their initial teaching assignments, including the skills necessary to work effectively with paraprofessionals and other support staff. To do this, high-quality induction programs for new teachers should be required for all districts and should be developed collaboratively by teachers and administrators.

These induction programs should provide for a reduced workload, to allow time for professional development activities—activities such as observing master teachers, talking with colleagues about teaching and learning, and responding to the guidance offered by mentors who review the novice teachers’ practice and recommend strategies to improve their classroom performance. Such programs should include a high-quality selection process to identify and train mentor teachers; adequate training and compensation for these mentors; and time for them to genuinely teach, support and evaluate beginning teachers.

And once teachers are in the classroom, they should receive ongoing, embedded professional development that is part and parcel of a valid evaluation system. We have proposed the overhaul of existing systems so they don’t simply provide snapshots but can be used to inform teaching and learning.

These requirements are not divorced from what students need to succeed: They are an integral part—along with out-of-classroom factors—in determining how well our students perform.

This reauthorization of ESEA presents an opportunity to improve teacher development and evaluation programs; to appropriately address school-environment issues that limit efforts to attract teachers to hard-to-staff schools and impede teaching and learning; and to help narrow the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

ESEA should also help ensure that teachers have the tools, time and trust they need to succeed, including offering teachers and students an environment that sets everyone up for success. Professional learning environments should include small classes, solid curriculum, healthy and adequate facilities (incorporating the most current technology), and opportunities for parental involvement. These are components that school systems should be held accountable for providing teachers and students so they can succeed. Indeed, as the New Haven contract and the evaluation systems that the teachers and school system just bargained demonstrate, that combination of collaboration and collective bargaining can create systemic and transformative change.

It is also critically important that teachers have the time to share, grow and work together so they can resolve student issues, share lesson plans, analyze student work, discuss and replicate what works, and avoid replicating what isn't working. We need to create a school environment that allows students to be supported by a team of teachers and administrators, not just the one teacher standing in front of the classroom.

One AFT priority (others are included in our formal recommendations), is to establish through ESEA a discretionary grant program for teacher centers that provide comprehensive professional development, information on research and curricula, and assistance for new and veteran teachers. Teacher centers also would provide an opportunity for teachers to direct their own professional growth, as well as to collaborate with their colleagues, community groups, foundations and universities on school improvement efforts. Programs would be funded through local education agencies (LEAs) and developed in collaboration with teachers unions. In New York City, teacher centers were a crucial part of the Chancellor's District, a program that resulted in significant gains in student achievement.

The reauthorization also should refocus the law on improving the quality of instruction by incorporating research-based professional development as well as curricular supports for teachers and paraprofessionals. In addition, a separate class-size reduction program with a concentrated formula for sending funds to high-poverty schools should be restored. This is important to students and their parents—as well as to teachers. Teachers will tell you this is critical to help them differentiate instruction for students and, in general, to help them know their students and their needs.

Much has been written about how to staff schools that struggle. Attracting and retaining qualified teachers for low-performing schools cannot be accomplished simply by forcing teachers to transfer or offering to pay them more. Report after report—including those that survey teachers, such as the recent Gates study—makes this point abundantly clear. Instead, ESEA should provide federal funding to help districts make the schools attractive places in which students can learn and teachers can teach. How can this be accomplished? First, physical plant and other working conditions need to be addressed, including creating a safe environment for employees and students. Second, meaningful professional development with ongoing instructional supports must be in place. Finally, ESEA should guarantee that teachers have a voice and an established role in developing and implementing policies that affect their students, profession and schools.

In addition to supporting efforts to attract and retain qualified teachers, the AFT believes we need to take a serious look at how to improve teacher evaluation systems. There is general and widespread agreement that these systems do not work as currently constructed. The AFT has spent a great deal of time on this, working with a task force of our members and local and state leaders. We were helped in this effort by an advisory group of top teacher-evaluation experts. The AFT task force concluded, as outlined in a speech I gave earlier this year, that the common ground on teacher quality is to create systems that continuously develop and accurately evaluate teachers on an ongoing basis. Unfortunately, poorly constructed evaluation systems miss a prime opportunity to systematically improve teacher practice and advance student learning. In addition, the current systems, despite their deficiencies, too often form the basis for many consequential decisions, such as whether a teacher is deemed to be performing satisfactorily, receives tenure, or is dismissed for what is determined to be poor performance.

To begin to develop adequate teacher development and evaluation systems, the ESEA reauthorization should establish a pilot program for LEAs that allows for the collaborative development and implementation of transparent and fair teacher development and evaluation systems. These models should aim to continuously advance and inform teaching as a means to improve student learning. The focus of such systems should be on developing and supporting great teachers, not simply on evaluating them. Investing in teachers and providing them with requisite supports must go hand in hand with the development and implementation of evaluation systems. These systems should be negotiated with the collective bargaining representatives or exclusive recognized representatives of teachers, and should include multiple measures of teaching practice as well as multiple measures of student learning. The key—as was the case in New Haven—is to bargain the systems, and if no bargaining exists, to ensure that teachers’ voices are heard. To do otherwise means that once again these systems will devolve to pro forma checklists or “gotchas”—essentially the status quo. And these systems should drive support for teachers throughout their careers by including induction, mentoring, ongoing professional development and career opportunities.

The goal of such a pilot is to develop more dynamic evaluation systems and learn from them. Instead of relying on inadequate measures like a single student test score, the goal must be to develop systems to help promising teachers improve, enable good teachers to become great, and identify those teachers who shouldn’t be in the classroom at all. To adequately do this, we must take the time, with teachers, to develop a system of professional growth and evaluation that reflects the sophistication and importance of their work. Any valid evaluation pilot will consider both outputs (test data, student work) and inputs (school environment, resources, professional development). And it must deconstruct what is working and should be replicated, as well as what isn’t working and should be abandoned.

Let me give you a firsthand example of why developing such pilots is so important. Recently, the New Haven Federation of Teachers and the New Haven school district were able to negotiate a breakthrough contract that sets out a new teacher evaluation system.

The contract establishes a labor-management committee to determine what constitutes "student progress" and how much weight it should be given in evaluations. The contract also establishes high-quality intervention through a peer assistance and review program staffed by full-time, union-selected educators, and reaffirms tenure and the principle of fair dismissal for educators.

To provide the flexibility that supports innovation, the contract also establishes a process for compensated changes to school working conditions, such as extended school hours, if 75 percent of building staff approve the change. And it authorizes conversion of up to three underperforming schools into union-represented charter schools, with a guarantee of no layoffs and full transfer rights for staff who wish to work in other buildings.

ESEA should also provide a clearinghouse so that best practices gleaned and implemented in the pilot projects can be disseminated broadly, with the goal of widespread replication throughout America's public schools.

We know that a natural outgrowth of teacher evaluation systems will be differentiated compensation systems. We know from the firsthand experience of our affiliates that differentiated compensation systems developed and implemented with the full support and collaboration of teachers can succeed. We have seen too many top-down plans fail because they lacked teacher buy-in and collaboration.

If the goal of differentiated compensation systems is simply to compensate teachers differently, systems can be easily developed that sort teachers into "effective" and "ineffective" categories and compensate them accordingly. But if the goal is to improve teaching and learning, compensation systems must be one component of comprehensive teacher development and evaluation that supports and nurtures educators' growth as well as evaluates their performance and affects their compensation.

As president of a labor union, it is my job to represent our members, and I succeed in that job only when I help them do their jobs well. They make it easy because of their extraordinary commitment to providing their students with the best education possible.

Last summer, we asked our members the following question: When your union deals with issues affecting both teaching quality and teachers' rights, which of these should be the higher priority—working for professional teaching standards and good teaching, or defending the job rights of teachers who face disciplinary action? By a ratio of 4-to-1 (69 percent to 16 percent), AFT members chose working for professional standards and good teaching as the higher priority.

No one should ever doubt that teachers want to do what's best for their students, and they want to be treated as professionals. No teacher—myself included—wants to work alongside ineffective teachers. Schools are communities where we build on each other's work. When a teacher is foundering, there are not only repercussions for the students, but also for the teachers down the hall. When it comes to those teachers who shouldn't be in the classroom, it is other teachers who are the first to speak up.

They—and the AFT—want a fair, transparent and expedient process to evaluate teachers so that those who need help receive it, and those who don't improve after being provided with help can be counseled out of the profession. Simply talking about “bad teachers” may give comfort to some, or be a rhetorical response to the terrible budget situation we now all face, but it does nothing to build a teacher development and evaluation system that will support and strengthen good teaching and great teachers. And that is why we will continue to speak out against those who believe that simply subjectively removing teachers is the answer, while they ignore the tough but important work required to develop a more comprehensive teacher development and evaluation system.

Imagine a system in which teachers have time to work together to tackle issues around student learning, share lesson plans, analyze student work, discuss successes and failures, and learn through high-quality professional development. Imagine a system in which students can't fall through the cracks—because they're backed by a team of teachers, not just the one at the front of the room. I just saw that at a school in Albuquerque, N.M.—Ernie Pyle Middle School—which is turning around through collaboration among not just teachers but all stakeholders.

In addition to tools and time, we must also foster a climate of trust. Teachers must be treated as partners in reform, with a real voice. Trust isn't something that you can write into a contract or lobby into law. Trust is the natural outgrowth of collaboration and communication, and it's the common denominator among schools, districts and cities that have achieved success.

Teaching isn't magic. It's hard, rewarding work that requires skill, patience, experience, love of children and support from others. It can't be done well without all of the things I've talked about here, nor can it be done well if students don't have their needs met outside the classroom. It can't be done unless we invest in broad, deep and engaging curricula that are aligned with the well-respected common core standards and the yet-to-be-developed assessments. And it cannot be done unless we provide wraparound services, where needed, to help ensure that all students can perform on a level playing field that allows them to compete with and overcome the negative impact of poverty. We must have a system of 360-degree accountability—real demonstrable responsibility, reciprocity and collaboration—for all those with an interest in the enterprise of education. We can't wish our way to high-quality teaching and an education system that gives all children, no matter their ZIP code, a great education. We have to legislate, implement and support our way to those goals. This reauthorization is an opportunity to do just that.

Thank you again for this opportunity to present the views of the AFT and our more than 1.4 million members on this important matter.