

Make teaching attractive, better — AFT chief

By Teri Banks
staff writer

Progress in the quest for educational excellence can be made only if there are radical changes in the way school systems operate and if more is done to enhance the teaching profession, said the president of the 610,000-member American Federation of Teachers.

"If this wave of reform doesn't bring improvements, there's going to be a terrible public backlash," warned Albert Shanker, head of the country's largest teacher labor union, at a statewide gathering of Michigan school officials Monday in the Dearborn Hyatt Hotel.

"You can't do it by making incremental changes," he said. "Unless we start thinking of radical changes, we're doomed."

Among his suggestions were competency testing during hiring, employ-

ment standards, more professional contacts and shorter school semesters.

THE FORMER New York schoolteacher praised efforts to restore public confidence and legislative funding to education, but said more needed to be done to restore quality teaching.

His remarks were made to about 1,800 members of the Michigan Association of School Boards and Michigan Association of School Administrators during the opening session of the organizations' annual assembly.

Shanker said he favored testing for teachers. He cited recent testing in Florida where 35 percent of teacher applicants failed the multiple-choice portion of a ninth-grade-level test.

"Now I'm of the old school, I think teachers should know more than the kids they're teaching," he said.

Unfortunately, he said, many of

those who failed in Florida went on to find teaching jobs in other states. In Florida, for instance, prospects who failed the exam once were hired because the school system was unable to find other applicants.

QUALITY TEACHING has become the central issue in the reform debate, he said, but the profession has serious trouble ahead.

The "baby bust" has decreased teaching-school enrollments, and the brightest prospects are turning to other fields. Years ago, women and minorities turned to teaching when discrimination shut the door on other possibilities.

Today, these people are attracted to other professions. The brightest minds are turning to fields like business and law, leaving schools with "an overwhelming majority who don't have the

simple skills to do kids any good," he said.

THE ANSWER to making the teaching profession attractive again is found in market mechanisms, he said.

"In the past two years, it's probably gone to 300 conferences on how to attract and retain good teachers, and the answer is amazingly simple," he said. "Compensate education well and create an environment that is professionally satisfying."

Some of his suggestions:

• He encouraged school boards to develop a set of employment standards and then stick to them.

• Insure that teachers are allowed to do what they do best and teach in their field of expertise.

• Teachers should be allowed time to exchange ideas with their peers. Today, they have little professional contact causing feelings of isolation from

other adults. Very few adults want to be locked up with a bunch of kids all the time," Shanker said.

CREATIVE APPROACHES will be needed to deal with upcoming shortages, he said.

Emphasis should be given to hiring temporary teachers, individuals diverted from other fields for stints in teaching. To attract these people, he suggested businesses and graduate schools offer incentives for time spent teaching. Employment credits and college loan reduction are two examples.

He said there was precedent — for instance, the Peace Corps and the military — for businesses offering credit for public service.

INSIDE THE classroom, the shortage should bring about greater use of technology, such as videotaping lectures, to allow the teacher time for individual student assistance.

Teachers should have greater independence in managing their workplace. Experienced or "master" teachers should help train new ones. And someday, he said, he foresees teacher panels called to decide cases of incompetence.

He suggested altering the structure of the school year, carving it into four-week reporting blocks. This would allow teachers to trace more easily the source of a student's problem if he ran into trouble.

"Right now when someone falls at the end of the year, you don't know where you lost them," Shanker said. "The public school system is faced with extinction through vouchers and tax credits. It's a dangerous time, but a time of great opportunity to work changes. But you need a willingness to risk and make changes and you need cooperation and not confrontation," he told the audience.



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