

**Testimony of Randi Weingarten,  
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**Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related  
Agencies**

**March 17, 2010**

Chairman Obey, Ranking Member Tiahrt, and subcommittee members, I am Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Thank you for inviting me to testify on President Obama's FY 2011 budget. Before I begin, I would also like to say hello to a fellow New Yorker, Rep. Nita Lowey and Rep. Mike Honda, a former AFT member.

On behalf of the AFT's more than 1.4 million members, I want to thank Chairman Obey for his leadership last year in moving the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and, more recently, for his invaluable commitment to moving a jobs bill in the House of Representatives.

Enacted in the midst of the deepest recession since the Great Depression, the law was instrumental in helping stabilize a rapidly declining economy. One year later, we can say with certainty that the Recovery Act has provided a lifeline where none existed and

has helped mitigate some of the most harmful effects of the recession on our nation's most vulnerable citizens.

President Obama and this Congress understood the link between a strong economy and a strong education in designating more than \$90 billion for education in the Recovery Act.

As a result of ARRA, more than 325,000 teachers, professors and other education staff, who were in danger of being laid off, are educating our students today in schools nationwide. ARRA funding has enabled schools to continue providing educational opportunity and stability to children in the midst of the economic turbulence swirling around them. In addition, thousands of essential state and local public employees whose jobs also were at risk are still delivering critical services in their communities.

Now, with Recovery Act funds winding down, states face additional budget gaps of up to \$180 billion next year. Massive state budget cuts could threaten and undermine all the good work that the Recovery Act has done to strengthen and improve our public schools and to save jobs.

Budget cuts of the type being contemplated by many state legislatures and municipalities will have a devastating effect on students, especially those whose families have been hit hardest by

the recession. Kids don't have a second chance at a good education.

We greatly appreciate the U.S. House of Representatives' efforts to stem this by continuing to protect vital education services as demonstrated by passage of the Jobs for Main Street bill last December and the recent introduction of the Local Jobs for America Act, which will support 250,000 education jobs. These bills are built on the principle that failure to preserve and create jobs endangers our economic progress, putting at risk any sustainable recovery. We hope the Senate will follow the leadership exhibited by the House of Representatives.

Yet, in the absence of immediate assistance, state and local governments looking to bridge looming budget gaps are contemplating decisions that have harmful long-term results. For example:

- New York is considering eliminating a wide range of Regents examinations, New York's traditional measure of high school student achievement. This has the potential to lower, if not destroy, the high standards set for the students of New York state.
- Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn is planning to fill the largest deficit in that state's history with severe cuts in education; 17,000

teachers could lose their jobs in the face of a \$13 billion deficit in the upcoming budget year.

- According to the Education Commission of the States, more than 100 districts currently use a four-day school week to save operating expenses. Dozens of other districts are considering making this change.
- We have received calls from our union locals suggesting that districts are attempting to reduce the number of school personnel, including paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities, in order to avoid paying for the services these students need. While this may save money, a child with Down syndrome or with physical or mental or emotional disabilities will not stop needing assistance from a paraprofessional or a trained special educator.
- In San Francisco, nearly 900 teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators have received layoff notices made necessary by the district's need to brace for a \$113 million shortfall over the next two years.

Similar to the funding provided by the Recovery Act, there are many things to applaud in President Obama's proposed budget, including increased funding for child care assistance, Head Start and the maximum Pell Grant.

But we are concerned about some of the policy implications that are attached to the budget proposal.

For example, ESEA funding historically has been used to even the playing field for school districts serving high numbers of disadvantaged students. Given the fiscal crises facing the states for the upcoming school year, we are concerned that virtually all of the proposed increase is for competitive grants, while Title I—the lifeblood for our most disadvantaged children—is flat-funded.

A child's education should not be based upon how well adults write grant applications.

We believe that Title I, Teacher Quality State Grants, IDEA and Title III all deserve significant formula-based increases, in addition to any funds provided for competitive grants.

Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Education has indicated that it would like to make Title I funding to states contingent upon meeting a number of requirements. So far, the requirements it has announced include adopting common standards and implementing teacher evaluation systems. We strongly believe in both—but conditioning funds intended and needed for the education of disadvantaged children is not the way to implement long-term systemic goals that should apply to everyone.

Just as a child's education should not be based on how well adults write grant applications, Title I funding should not be based on the outcome of political fights at the state level. It should be based simply on what is needed to ensure that students are well-prepared for college, work and life.

On a positive note, we were pleased to see that the budget proposal includes language that any educator-related performance-based pay system should be developed with input from teachers and school leaders. The budget also invests in more programs that can be used for wraparound supports for students, and it allows for extended learning time and community schools—ideas we have championed because we know they help disadvantaged children receive the assistance they need to succeed in the classroom. Similarly, the budget proposes a significant increase in funding for School Improvement Grants (SIG) for our lowest-performing schools.

As with all policy, however, the devil is in the details, and we are concerned that the department has proposed only allowing SIG funds to be used for a rigid, narrow list of unproven options that educators and school districts can use to undertake reform and spur increased student achievement.

This fact is incontrovertible: Our lowest-performing schools require immediate attention, and they must change their current practices. The status quo in these schools is unacceptable. Each day that they do not improve is a day lost to the students who attend them and the teachers who work in them. But we can't fire our way to an improved education system, and we can't wish our way to it. It will require research-based solutions that are well implemented, as well as consistency and shared responsibility on the part of all stakeholders.

To this end, SIG funds should be allowed to be directed toward a fifth allowable model that permits a school to use research-based approaches that meet the specific needs of the students in that school. As should be clear from my testimony, the AFT believes that any SIG model will only be successful if the voices of educators are incorporated during the design and selection of a turnaround model, as well as during its implementation.

No single factor causes a school to struggle; rather, it is a combination of factors. Likewise, low-performing schools will not be successfully turned around by a single intervention. Their needs are more dynamic and consequently require multiple interventions, including focused academic instruction, real and reliable shared accountability, the use of proven and research-based programs and

strategies, strong and collaborative leadership, and a commitment to working with the community whose children attend the schools.

Specifically, struggling schools need aligned curriculum, standards and assessments; workable strategies for teacher recruitment, induction, retention and professional development; differentiated instruction; extended learning and enrichment time; family and community engagement; and community schools, in which the services that children and their families need are provided in the school building.

We request that this committee ask the tough questions about the proposals made in this budget—the most direct and important one being: Will they work? Will they help students and teachers succeed by providing them with the tools they need? Will they require responsibility from all—not just from teachers? Will they lead us to a vote on a bill that we all can support and pass and see well-implemented—or are they the start of another season of dissatisfaction on the bumpy road to reauthorization?

Teachers are willing to go the extra mile to help students succeed, but they need the tools, time and support to do their jobs well.

As a recent survey by Scholastic Inc. and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation shows, teachers feel strongly that they must be real partners with school leadership in designing improvement plans. That

is why the single most important work for us to do is change the labor-management relationship in schools, so that all the adults, working together, are focused on student needs.

Teachers know how to make genuine education progress. We just need to listen to them and provide strong and supportive school leadership, common standards across the states, multiple ways to measure teachers' teaching and student learning, and a bridge between the school and children's homes to raise student achievement.

But perhaps most important, the survey found that nearly all teachers say that non-monetary rewards, such as supportive leadership and collaborative working environments, are the most important factors in retaining good teachers; just 8 percent say pay-for-performance plans are absolutely essential.

I ask you to remember these findings as you evaluate the funding increases and cuts proposed by the administration.

Similarly, I respectfully ask you to move forward carefully and allow the authorizing committees to complete their work, before attempting to interpret and implement the policy proposals hinted at in President Obama's proposed FY 2011 budget.

Thank you again for this opportunity to present the views of the AFT and our 1.4 million members on the president's budget proposal.