

Shanker Asks Greater Autonomy For Teachers and School Officials

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WASHINGTON, March 31 — Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, called today for expanding an approach to education that would allow groups of teachers to create autonomous programs within their own schools.

Contending that the wave of changes in education enacted by state legislatures in the last five years had bypassed 80 percent of the nation's students, Mr. Shanker called for initiatives to be put in the hands of teachers and administrators in individual schools who, he said, "have a special understanding" of what works with their students.

Speaking at a National Press Club luncheon, Mr. Shanker proposed that groups of as few as six teachers be allowed to design and run customized curriculums in individual schools if the school board, principal and other teachers approved. Parents would have the option of enrolling their children in these programs, he said.

Mr. Shanker emphasized that the programs should involve students of a variety of backgrounds and learning skills, rather than only elite or disadvantaged students. He said leaders of the teachers' union, which has a national membership of 630,000, would ask all its locals to begin developing plans for such programs.

'One Remedy, One Pill'

Mr. Shanker was speaking nearly five years to the day after a report by a Presidential commission described what it called "a rising tide of mediocrity" in the nation's schools, leading school districts throughout the country to press for changes in curriculums and teaching standards.

While lauding the improvements that resulted, Mr. Shanker said they had been largely mandated by state legislatures, primarily by imposing stricter course standards and requirements. As a result, he said, they have benefited only students who are able to learn in conventional settings.

"Essentially we have one remedy, one pill, one way of teaching, and we say there is something wrong with the kids if they don't respond to the pill," Mr. Shanker said.

But he cited programs in Dade County, Fla., Rochester, N.Y., Hammond, Ind., and a few other districts where teachers and administrators have been given greater authority over the operation of their schools.

New York Contract Cited

He also noted that a provision in the New York City teachers contract, negotiated last September, allows individual schools in the city to change any contract stipulation if 75 percent of the teachers in the school vote to do so and the principal, union representative and superintendent agree.

Mr. Shanker urged educators to follow these examples and experiment on their own to devise more effective approaches to learning.

Responding to Mr. Shanker's remarks, William Kristol, chief of staff and counselor to Education Secretary William J. Bennett, said the department "didn't have problems" with the proposal, but added, "We think there is lots of evidence that traditional methods are working."