

# Following Shanker's Lead

Two Leaders of the Albert Shanker Institute Discuss Continuing Shanker's Fight for Public Education, the Labor Movement, and Democracy



## Reflecting, Pursuing Knowledge, and Building Coalitions: Al Shanker's Legacy

**LEO CASEY:** What did it mean to head up an institute with Albert Shanker's name on it? There are different views of that, and I have a very distinct perspective. There are folks who knew and worked with Shanker who view him as an authority. And so, what Shanker thought about a particular question became what we should think. I always found that view problematic. I'm reminded of Thomas Aquinas saying the weakest of all arguments is the argument from authority.

What being the head of the Albert Shanker Institute meant for me was striving to live up to the example of Shanker as a public intellectual. One of Shanker's most admirable traits as a public intellectual was that he never allowed himself to be hardened into a dogma. He was always rethinking questions, always open to the possibility that the way he had addressed something in the past was not the correct or best way. Perhaps the circumstances had changed, or his own thinking changed.

Right before he passed away, an article<sup>†</sup> based on an in-depth interview of Shanker was published in *New York Teacher*; the interviewer asked if there was anything he regretted or would do differently now. Shanker said he had changed his mind about communists as teachers. He had argued that communists should not be allowed to teach because they adhere to a dogmatic ideology and are not open-minded. Later in life, he realized that there are many causes of being closed-minded—including many well-respected religions. He thought that his earlier concept of dogmatic thinking should not be relevant. Instead, teachers should be judged by what they do in the classroom.

This example stuck with me because it speaks to who Shanker was. He was always

From the 1960s until his death in 1997, Albert Shanker was a major force in expanding the labor movement, defending and improving public education, and fighting for all people to live freely in democracies. As president of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), he became known internationally as an education statesman devoted to making all public schools excellent and as a fierce labor leader determined to ensure that working people had a voice and dignity on the job.

The AFT established the Albert Shanker Institute in 1998 to carry on his intellectual tradition of being open to—and debating—any idea that might enrich the lives of working people and their families. In 2021, executive director Leo Casey handed the reins of the Albert Shanker Institute to Mary Cathryn D. Ricker, and that seemed like a perfect time to reflect on the institute's past and present. What follows is a conversation between Casey and Ricker on Albert Shanker's legacy and how the institute can ensure that public education, unionism, and democracy are mutually reinforcing. For an

introduction to Shanker and the institute, see the sidebar on page 22.

Casey is now an assistant to AFT President Randi Weingarten and a member of the editorial board of *Dissent* magazine. Previously, he served as vice president for academic high schools for the United Federation of Teachers. He began his teaching career in 1984 at Clara Barton High School in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn and has written extensively on civics, education, unionism, and politics.\* Ricker is a National Board–certified middle school English/language arts teacher who has served as Minnesota's commissioner of education, executive vice president of the AFT, and president of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (now the Saint Paul Federation of Educators). Prior to her leadership outside of the classroom, Ricker was a classroom teacher for 13 years in Minnesota, Washington state, and South Korea. —EDITORS

\*To read an excerpt of Leo Casey's book, *The Teacher Insurgency: A Strategic and Organizing Perspective*, see "Organizing and Mobilizing" in the Spring 2021 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/spring2021/casey](http://aft.org/ae/spring2021/casey).

<sup>†</sup>To read the article, go to [go.aft.org/r3b](http://go.aft.org/r3b).

willing to rethink issues. Today, he would not want us to stick with his positions on topics. If he were alive, his thinking would continue to change—and so should ours.

Perhaps even more importantly, Shanker shared his new questions and ideas openly. He was a perfect example of a public intellectual who is publicly engaged and always willing to rethink questions and see new possibilities.

**MARY CATHRYN D. RICKER:** I am the first executive director who didn't know Al Shanker personally and didn't have the chance to interact with him. The Shanker I know is through the biography by Richard Kahlenberg,<sup>†</sup> the reflective essays in *American Educator*,<sup>§</sup> and the stories shared by those who did know Shanker. I completely agree that he would never stay static in his opinions, and neither should we.

What I have gleaned is that Shanker had a thirst for knowledge. He was a voracious reader; he loved discussions and debates. His open-minded pursuit of knowledge is what brought peer assistance and review\*\* to the national union. I've heard about executive council meetings in which Shanker brought Dal Lawrence, the head of the Toledo Federation of Teachers, which pioneered peer assistance and review, to talk about its benefits. They both practically had shoes thrown at them at first. But through discussion and debate, many local leaders came around. By 2005, when I became president of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers, I inherited an AFT that invited me to learn more about peer assistance and review, and then supported me to negotiate it in my local's practice. That arc tells me about the spirit that we inherit at the institute that bears his name.

It is not lost on me that Shanker envisioned the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. And now, an institute bearing his name is being led by a National Board-certified teacher. As I have encouraged others to pursue board certification, I've talked about the meaning of a reflective practitioner. Shanker was the consummate reflective practitioner. He looked for coun-

terarguments. He wanted people to poke holes in his ideas in order to make those ideas stronger.

So, while we remain committed to Shanker's three major priorities—public education, the labor movement, and democracy—we also must be committed to reflection. When we evolve our thinking, we are honoring Al Shanker.

**LEO:** Those three themes of public education, unionism, and democracy are central to our Shanker Institute mission. But how we promote them and what they look like differ in different contexts. Before I came to the institute, our democracy work was international. We supported people like Han Dongfang, the leader of the independent union movement in China and an institute board member, to help Chinese workers organize. But now, we have a situation in which American democracy itself hangs in the balance, so our democracy work made a major shift to focus on our domestic challenges.

In addition to our three priorities, a key value is how we pursue those priorities. The institute has a reputation for inviting in people who disagree with us. There is a whole range of views within the union movement, especially about the decline of membership over the last 50 years, and there is something to be gained by debate. Holding conferences where we invite people from all those views to openly debate is a legacy of Shanker as a public intellectual. We value the way debate makes ideas sharper. Even when we do not come to agreement, there is something of value that comes from the debate—you learn from it and incorporate it into your strategies going forward.

**MARY CATHRYN:** As part of Shanker's ongoing reflection and desire to learn, he was constantly scanning the horizon, looking for ideas to amplify. I see continuing that practice as our responsibility. The institute is already working with, and striving to find and elevate, some of the best labor leaders in the country. Randi Weingarten, the AFT's president and an institute board member, is a perfect example of someone who also scans the horizon for the most promising practices.

Tying these threads together is another critical practice that started with Shanker and remains a priority for the institute. We

don't just have three priorities; we ask how public education, unionism, and democracy strengthen each other.

In 2007, while I was president of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers, I had the opportunity to go on a study trip to Yemen with the institute. The immediate goal was to help our Yemeni union colleagues practice democracy in their workplace so they could familiarize themselves with what it takes for democracy to function. And the larger goal was for them to learn what to expect of their government in practicing democracy. It exemplified the intersection of education, unionism, and democracy.

Today, as we face attacks on our democracy, the labor movement, and public education, our instinct is to figure out how all three can reinforce each other. We are asking: How do we reinvent and reinvigorate our unions and our labor movement to be a vehicle for strengthening our democracy? How do we defend our democracy to strengthen our public schools? How do we recommit to our public schools and make them an even stronger foundation for our democracy?

When we evolve our thinking, we are honoring Al Shanker.

**LEO:** These intersections are important, and so is being strategic in building coalitions around them. Relationships are important, especially for making progress on political issues. Shanker was a big ideas man, but he was notoriously ill at ease in social settings. Still, he forged real relationships—often not with the usual suspects. He reached out to people who would not have been considered normal allies for a teachers' union. That's important. Shanker knew that he needed to put together the strongest possible coalition to address issues. He would work with people in powerful positions on the issues where they could agree, and openly disagree on other issues. Shanker had many partnerships with people who believed in public educa-

<sup>†</sup>To read an excerpt from Kahlenberg's biography of Shanker, visit [go.aft.org/f93](http://go.aft.org/f93).

<sup>§</sup>For an extensive collection of Shanker's remarks and writing, see the Spring–Summer 1997 issue of *American Educator*: [go.aft.org/fxl](http://go.aft.org/fxl).

\*\*To learn more about peer assistance and review, visit [go.aft.org/97y](http://go.aft.org/97y).

tion yet were never won over on unionism. This ability to build coalitions is an important part of Shanker's legacy.

## Soft Power: The Institute's Distinct Contribution

**LEO:** As teachers and former AFT leaders, we are in unique positions to ask what's distinctive about the institute within the AFT constellation. I have a couple of

thoughts. One is that I have always thought of the institute as the AFT's institution of soft power. Political scientists distinguish between hard power, such as military might, and soft power, like diplomacy, treaties, and culture and ideas. Within the AFT, our equivalents of hard power are organizing and political actions. The institute cultivates soft power by trying to impact national and regional policy debates, mainly through our distinct union voice.



# Albert Shanker: A Champion for Working People and Their Children

Albert Shanker, who led the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 until his death in 1997, was born on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1928. His parents were Russian Jewish immigrants. While his father delivered newspapers from a pushcart, his mother—who worked in a sweatshop as a sewing machine operator—taught Shanker a deep appreciation of trade unionism and a love of spirited debate. Although he didn't speak a word of English when he entered first grade, Shanker flourished in New York City's public school system. He headed the Stuyvesant High School debating team and graduated with honors from the University of Illinois, but then ran out of funds just short of completing a PhD in philosophy at Columbia University. Having taken what he described as a "lousy job" as a per-diem substitute teacher at PS 179 in East Harlem, he launched a career as an educator and trade union leader. As president of the American Federation of Teachers, he became known internationally as a strong and courageous advocate for labor—as well as an "iconoclastic thinker," "champion of children," and "educational statesman."

As a child, Shanker encountered vicious antisemitism in his neighborhood, but also learned the value of public education for forming civic identity, expanding intellectual horizons, and increasing economic opportunity. Once he began teaching in New York City's public schools, he was outraged at working conditions. What struck him most was the basic unfairness to teachers—the low pay, lack of dignity, and lack of voice. He helped form the United Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 2) in 1960 and became its president in 1964.

With Shanker's dogged efforts at unionizing teachers, his ability to lead his members—who, by the end of the 1960s,

included paraprofessionals—and his skills at negotiating with city officials, the United Federation of Teachers became the country's and the world's largest local union. Nationally, his efforts brought about the rapid transformation of education into the most organized sector in the country.

Shanker clearly saw the increasing dangers to both public education and the labor movement as a conservative political movement swept America, particularly with Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980. Shanker advocated for trailblazing reforms and challenged his union's members. He urged a restructuring of the AFT into a broader union of professionals and argued for expanded organizing efforts into the fields of nursing, public service, higher education, and preschool. He asked all these constituencies to reshape their union's priorities to make it crystal clear that serving members meant serving students, patients, clients, and the public too. He encouraged experiments in practices previously dismissed out of hand

(such as differential pay, charter schools, and peer review), often urging new policies within a collective bargaining framework, but also at the state and federal levels.

Shanker also fought to promote democracy at home and abroad. In foreign policy, he supported and defended labor's democratic internationalism—including its opposition to communism on the left and authoritarianism on the right—based on the principles of freedom of association and workers' right to organize. Ultimately, Shanker became the labor leader to contend with in virtually every area of public policy.

*To learn more about Albert Shanker, read "The Agenda That Saved Public Education" by Richard D. Kahlenberg in the Fall 2007 issue of American Educator: [go.aft.org/f93](http://go.aft.org/f93). The article was excerpted from Kahlenberg's excellent biography of Shanker, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*.*

—Staff of the Albert Shanker Institute

The Albert Shanker Institute, endowed by the American Federation of Teachers and named in honor of its late president, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to three themes: excellence in public education, unions as advocates for quality, and freedom of association in the public life of democracies. With an independent board of directors composed of educators, business representatives, labor leaders, academics, and public policy analysts, its mission is to generate ideas, foster candid exchanges, and promote constructive policy proposals related to these issues.

Current focus areas include:

- Teacher time use and a new context for teaching
- Equity and adequacy in school finance
- The characteristics of successful literacy systems
- Educating for democratic citizenship
- Working for the common good

To learn about the institute's events and resources, including its annual conversation series, blog, and original research, visit [shankerinstitute.org](http://shankerinstitute.org).

When I first came to the institute in 2012, it was the height of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, both of which focused heavily on high-stakes testing and accountability. What struck me about the elite discourse on education in Washington, DC, was a complete absence of teacher voice. Since I had the institute platform, I was determined that there would be at least one teacher interjecting ideas and intervening in policy discussions.

My second thought about the institute's place in the AFT is that we have the luxury of not having to fight immediate battles. Much of the AFT is always focused on very immediate, critical, sometimes even existential battles. The institute can devote more energy to long-term thinking and strategizing. We do this with a very small staff and, in my opinion, punch far above our weight.

**MARY CATHRYN:** I agree. It is unique in the labor movement to have a think tank that can step out of the moment. And I see another aspect of the institute that is distinctive: we don't just follow the research; we conduct our own original research and set new agendas. The AFT has grown to 1.7 million members; in addition to our members working in schools and colleges, we represent healthcare professionals and public employees. In fact, the AFT is the nation's second-largest nurses' union.

And so, building on our institute's commitment to public education, the labor movement, and democracy, we now have broader responsibilities and should be looking for opportunities to support these members' core issues. Consider healthcare during this pandemic. Could the institute's capacity to conduct research and build coalitions be harnessed to help meet our healthcare members' needs? And consider public employees as we face attacks on voting rights and election integrity; these workers are the daily defenders of democracy. What could the institute be doing to support the workers who protect voters and polling places? These are the types of questions we need to ask as we seek new opportunities to develop and wield our soft power.

**LEO:** How you do this long-term thinking and strategic planning is important; there's no shortage of issues that need to be addressed, but we have a finite pool of human resources. It's critical to be able to

identify the points of leverage where our intervention can have maximum effect.

The best example from my time at the institute was our research on teachers of color. Policymakers had a general sense that the teaching profession was not reflective of the student body, but the problem had not been documented in a way that would force people to address the issue. The institute undertook a study\* of nine of the largest school districts in the United States—but it was not easy because they did not want to turn over their data. We had to bring in lawyers to file requests according to the states' various public information laws.

We persisted, and the resulting report showed that the lack of teacher diversity was far more severe than anyone thought. That was particularly true for African American teachers. Not only were their numbers far behind the numbers of African American students, but they were declining in these major cities. Once we laid that foundation, many other people and organizations waded into the issue, conducting further research and publishing reports. By the end of the Obama administration, the US Department of Education was taking on the issue.

This line of research no doubt would have been undertaken eventually by some other group, but it would not have happened as quickly or thoroughly without the institute's foundational research. Today, the need to recruit and retain more teachers of color, especially African American teachers, is widely discussed. Many initiatives are examining teacher preparation and early career supports to address the problem.

To me, both the institute's research on this issue and its strategic approach are important—and the approach is especially so because it can be applied across issues. For the institute, a key question is: Can we make a difference? Many issues are important, but for us to take one on, we need to devise an intervention that no one else is doing that could make a difference.

Here's another example. With the focus on high-stakes testing and teachers' "value added," teachers were being reduced to scores. In addition to pointing out the many problems with high stakes for students and teachers and the many ways in which the resulting scores are questionable at best, we intentionally started shifting the

debate to the social side of education. There's a strong body of research on the importance of school culture and quality relationships—both among educators and among educators and students. This was well known, but it was being ignored in the fervor over accountability. So again, the key here is that our small institute found a point of leverage in which we could intervene in a way no one else was to change the terms of the debate.



For the institute, a key question is: Can we make a difference?

**MARY CATHRYN:** One of the most exciting opportunities for me, as I transition into this role, is scanning the horizon to see how the institute can continue to build on your work—how our resources can continue to do the greatest good. For example, what is the next natural growth from the teacher diversity report? We remain firmly committed to diversifying the teaching profession because that is what our students deserve and because we know greater diversity will strengthen our public schools.

When I was commissioner of education in Minnesota, I spent time listening to aspiring and experienced teachers and administrators. The stress they are experi-

\*To read the study, visit [go.aft.org/j11](http://go.aft.org/j11).



Zachary... were ranked by the survey as less by the...  
 There are not isolated events. Freedom House...  
 democracy from the beginning of the 1980s, but the...  
 of democracy with the fall of a communist in East...  
 year three years, societies in which about 1.5 billion...  
 20 percent of the world's population - have also...  
 political systems with more democratic forms of go...  
 But it would be a big mistake to assume that...  
 characteristically toward a world in which everyone will...  
 Stable democracies involve more than winning a d...  
 and holding free elections. Their long term success...  
 civil societies that support institutions like a free...  
 unions, as well as organizations like Boy and Girl...  
 public of groups of all kinds. Institutions and orga...  
 nizations have been destroyed by repressive governm...  
 ent at all.

By listening closely to our members, we can help them shine lights on the things that need to be improved.

encing has become overwhelming. The teaching profession is breaking; turnover is high, substitutes are hard to find, and enrollment in teacher preparation programs is declining. And all of that was true before the pandemic.

We need to rebuild this profession—and we're under no obligation to rebuild it the way we found it.

If we are to create a profession that welcomes a more diverse teaching force, we have to offer the supports teachers and students need. After all, teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions. The teacher diversity study and subsequent work by the institute shows that we should reimagine the profession. We must create a safe and welcoming profession for a diverse, high-quality workforce that knows how to meet the needs of our diverse students.

Another area where I would like to build on the progress you and the team made is defending the public square and public discourse. School boards have

been in the headlines for months with far too many angry exchanges about masks, vaccines, and other COVID-19 mitigation strategies. Some school board members have been threatened and have quit, and in some places momentum is growing for board members to be appointed instead of elected.

People might not expect an institute founded by a teachers' union to be a defender of elected school boards—but this is a critical area where public education and democracy intersect. The opportunity for a community to elect the leaders who will shape the public education of their children is threatened right now. This is a critical fight to make sure we don't cede the public square anywhere.

The divisive experiences in school board meetings across the country, particularly in the lead-up to the midterm elections, is a quintessential example of both that intersection of issues we talked about earlier and the opportunity to engage in strategic coalition-building. The first thing the Shanker Institute did was research the common points of friction in these episodes and look to see what current literature says. Now we have begun discussing what that intervention is that can make a difference. Bringing people together in conferences or conversations, which the institute has been doing for decades, is both a strength of the institute and what this fraught time needs. Retreating from conversation about the rancor in school boards cedes that public space. Our priority will be to find the common ground among all of us who believe democratically elected school boards matter—even when we are on opposite sides of a debated issue—and promote this intersection of our democracy, our public schools, and our communities.

Leo, I also have to say that launching the civics and democracy fellowships, the Educating for Democratic Citizenship project, alongside you during the transition of our roles was a privilege. Thank you for your work the last two years to imagine this initiative in which accomplished teachers serve as fellows writing strong K-12 inquiry-based civics and democracy lessons to be housed on Share My Lesson. And thank you for raising funds so that those teachers could be compensated. As a teacher leader, you saw how No Child Left Behind ravaged social studies lessons,

particularly at the elementary level. As a result, students have been coming into middle school without the background knowledge they need to thrive academically. Teachers have been working to reinvigorate social studies, but despite the existence of K-12 state standards, one of the barriers has been high-quality lesson ideas. I am looking forward to sharing the lessons these accomplished teachers are creating and raising more funds to continue this work after this school year.

## Cultivating Opportunities: The Institute's Future

**LEO:** I can't imagine a better successor leading the institute. You are an educational professional who started from excellence in the classroom. I would have loved to be in your class as a student, and I would have loved to observe and collaborate with you as a teacher. Your experience—as a National Board-certified teacher, a local union leader, a national union leader, and a state commissioner of education—gives you moral authority and credibility.

**MARY CATHRYN:** That is incredibly kind; thank you so much. Every day, as I begin to fill up my bookshelves and look at the day's work ahead, I have a responsibility to continue to build. I have the honor of standing on the shoulders of giants, and I am gladly taking up your commitment to centering the voices of teachers and learners.

In the last 50 years, we have learned a lot about teaching and learning, but we keep trying to apply what we have learned to a 1970's school day. As Randi said last May, we need a renaissance in public education, including public colleges and universities. I look forward to convening diverse groups so that we can figure out the institute's leverage points for seeding that renaissance. To begin with, we get to shine lights on those things that need changing.

And we get to do the same for public employees and healthcare professionals. By listening very closely to those members, we can help them shine lights on the things that need to be improved. One of my goals is for AFT members to be able to say, "This is what the institute does for me while I'm teaching, or taking care of patients, or defending democracy." This is an incredible opportunity and a very serious obligation. □