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National Press Club
Launch of Professionals for the Public Integrity Coalition
May 20, 2009

I want to thank Paul Almeida for pushing us all to think in a broader way with all of the professional associations who have joined this coalition. I'm thrilled that Glen Ruskin is co-moderating this with Paul, and I'm thrilled to be on a panel with these distinguished folk from the various different associations and with my friend Ann Converso.

If you look at our logo, you know that we at the American Federation of Teachers see ourselves as a union of professionals. We believe that the professional is key to the quality of the work that we do, and to defending the public and the public interests.

We also believe not only that it is important to fight for those standards but that we actually have a responsibility to protect the integrity of our professions and to protect the integrity and the goodwill and the public as well as our members. We see them as hand in hand.

The simple fact is that the people who do the work that we do, care more about the work than anybody else and can do more than anybody else about improving public services that are essential to American safety, well-being and success.

We fight for teachers working to reduce class size to make sure we can differentiate instruction to the needs of all the children that we serve. We fight for nurses to have adequate staffing levels, as Ann so eloquently talked about before. We fight for a college faculty members seeking academic freedom and proper staffing.

Those are the same kinds of fights that Mark and Mary so eloquently talked about before in terms of protecting that vital public interest—the fight of a school aide to become respected and valued and be part of a school team, or the fight that a state employee will make against struggling cutbacks and what budget cuts will do in terms of the quality of the work that public employees do for the public.

So all of us in this coalition care passionately about building a profession that can be the best it can be and about making those fights on a micro level that actually both build a profession and strengthen our public integrity. Our goal is to uphold the highest standards of personal conduct, professional practice and service to the community.

And this is not just about what goes on in the individual workplace. You see the connection in the individual workplace and the bolder, broader public purpose.

So whether the issue is education reform, healthcare reform or governmental reform, policymakers' efforts will fail unless they are built on a foundation of respect for the professionals who do the work.

We know what is effective and what isn't effective. We know what to keep and what to change. When professionals are left out of policy-making what we get is top-down, ivory-tower policies that don't work in the real world. Worse, what we get is a stifling of the thought process and the freedom to speak that we make and see real serious mistakes. We've seen it all.

But the flip side is this, when professionals are accorded the respect, the recognition and the rewards that we and they so rightfully deserve there is no limit to what can be accomplished. School research is quite clear about this: When there is collaboration in school environments, we see successful schools and we see successful outcomes for children.

The AFT is and always will be a union that confronts injustice, embraces the excluded, questions conventional wisdom, challenges the status quo, and works 24/7 to improve the institutions where our members work.

No matter what is thrown at us we will push to strengthen the institutions, including speak out against the things that we know are wrong. That is in part the reason we are so thrilled to be part of this coalition.

So we stand ready to work with public officials and administrators to improve public institutions, to work with parents and taxpayers to improve public schools, colleges, hospitals and state governments, and to ensure that educators, nurses and all those who serve the public have what they need to excel in their work, including security, dignity and a voice in the workplace.

And so for all of those reasons, as you see, the AFT is proud to work with the partners in this coalition to defend public integrity, or to defend integrity in the workplace, and because we know that will better serve the public interest.