

Statement by LFT Vice President Jim Randels

Press conference exposing the American Legislative Exchange Council agenda
August 3, 2011

Good Morning,

My name is Jim Randels, and I have been an English teacher in public schools in New Orleans for over 20 years. In addition, I am a graduate of New Orleans' public schools as well as a parent and grandparent of students in them.

I am here because of my deep concerns with ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council, and its threat to the fundamental ideals of democracy and fairness and equal opportunity that are the best that our country has to offer.

One of ALEC's stated top priorities is to privatize public education. ALEC's model legislation makes education a profit center rather than a public good for all.

My 48 years of direct involvement in public education teach me that privatizing public education is dangerous to the American way and to the education of children.

I was an elementary school student in New Orleans during the integration of the 1960's and early 1970's. At the time, I thought the goal of the civil rights movement was school desegregation. As an adult, I've been fortunate to learn from elders such as Jerome Smith, one of the freedom riders 50 years ago who had his head bashed in but kept his spirit and his sense of justice intact. Jerome—and many of my mentors in New Orleans—note that equal funding for black and white schools was an even more important goal to his generation of civil rights workers than desegregation was.

How does this relate to ALEC's goal of privatizing public schools and promoting business models? All you have to do is look at the competition and budding privatization movement in New Orleans public schools to understand the dangers of ALEC. According to a recent report by Tulane University's Cowan Institute, we are operating a radically separate and unequal school system in New Orleans. Some of our public schools spend over \$17,000 per student while others spend as little as \$8,000 per student. I don't know about you, but I don't want to return to the days of separate and unequal education for any of our children. ALEC's legislation helps increase the likelihood of a return to that shameful chapter in our country's past.

I became a teacher in 1984. Immediately I chose to join AFT Local 527. I gladly pay membership dues to work with my fellow educators to ensure high quality teaching and professional development and to be a voice for justice and fairness not just for my fellow teachers and school employees but also for and with our students and their families. And when I pay my dues, I have a seat at the decision-making table of my local, state, and national AFT organizations.

Now here comes ALEC. It wants to do away with the fundamental membership democracy that my union embodies. In ALEC world, schools would become private entities funded by public money. As a taxpayer, I would have no voice in the way public schools are run. I don't know about you, but I don't want to return to an era of taxation without representation.

But ALEC's way of operating represents just such taxation without representation.

Under ALEC, state legislators and corporations meet behind closed doors to rewrite education law to benefit corporations not children and to promote legislation designed to make it harder for you and me to have our voices heard.

Here in Louisiana, our own legislators have attempted to introduce ALEC legislation. HB 621 introduced by Representative Talbot would have allowed tax credits for families and corporations which donate to private schools. This bad piece of legislation would have robbed needed revenue from the public school system by taking money out of the state treasury through tax credits. This is not good public policy.

In addition to being a graduate of and teacher in public schools in New Orleans, I am a parent, uncle, and grandparent of students in our schools.

Right now, my granddaughter Niyah is unable to enroll in a public pre-kindergarten class in New Orleans. My niece Emma faced the same situation last year. My nephews William and Charlie could not get into public pre-K either and had to appeal and fight to be placed in kindergarten at the public elementary school three blocks from their house. These are the realities of the free market approach to public education that ALEC promotes.

The ALEC way turns parents into consumers shopping for schools rather than

citizens building high quality public schools. ALEC's privatization, profit model wants parents to be consumers. But America needs parents to be citizens.

Education policy must be based on best practices and what is in the best interests of children not a profit driven corporation and a legislator meeting in secret. Pre-kindergarten is one of those proven best practices but the children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews of taxpayers like me across the U.S. are deprived of this public good. Rather than working to privatize education, the legislators affiliated with ALEC should be working to fund pre-kindergarten for their constituents.

We should be working together to do away with separate and unequal schools, to ensure that taxation without representation does not return, to nurture citizens rather than create consumers, to work for the public good rather than for private profit.