

Good afternoon.

I'm Andy Ford and I'm happy to be with you today here in the Tiger's Den... at least until we get to the famous or should I say infamous question and answer session.

There are 135,000 teachers, school bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, school nurses, college and university faculty, and other education professionals who, together, are the Florida Education Association. Together, we stand up for our fellow members, for the more than 3,750,000 children attending Florida schools, and for public education across the state.

We are the voice for all education professionals, leading the effort to strengthen public education and ensure all Florida's children obtain a quality education. Our members take their role as advocates for public schools very seriously. We will not tolerate lawmakers and policy-makers whose rhetoric supports "holding education harmless" but whose actions betray public education and our state's children.

We've demanded real education reform that gives children, educators, and our public schools what they need to improve student achievement and close the achievement gaps.

Mediocrity isn't something that we are interested in. The teachers, school staff, and higher education faculty who are the Florida Education Association lead a broad coalition of education advocates, spearheading the effort to preserve our groundbreaking class size amendment, stop voucher schemes from weakening public education, support and uphold high standards for students, rebuild and modernize our schools, and advance the cause of public education in Florida.

Today, though, in an environment that I can only say is "troubling" from an economic and budgetary perspective, I want to focus briefly on four critical issues that give us the opportunity for truly great schools all across the state...and I want to tell you a little bit about why these issues—and the cause of education in general—should matter to you a great deal.

These critical four issues are:

- Smaller class sizes where the focus is on learning instead of teaching the test.
- Closing the achievement gaps, envisioning the schools of tomorrow and making them a reality.
- Professional pay for professional work.

- And radically reducing Florida's high school dropout rate.

The place to start, though, is smaller class sizes where teachers can focus on learning. There's always a new idea to solve the education puzzle: a new trick, a new scheme, and a new political gimmick being floated in Tallahassee. But when it comes to educational achievement, nothing ever comes close to the power of smaller class sizes. And while many education reform proposals remain controversial, reducing class size is strongly supported by parents, teachers, and education researchers of all stripes.

While the research is important this is an issue that is so simple and obvious that most of us understand it instinctively. Smaller class sizes mean more time for teachers to discover and address each student's individual challenges and needs. Smaller class sizes mean more one-on-one attention for every student. And smaller class sizes mean a safer learning environment and better classroom discipline, because a teacher is better able to keep control of the class.

That means the teacher can focus on teaching, and the kids can focus on learning. Let me say clearly that the Florida Education Association supports accountability and thinks that a standardized testing program is a part... let me say that again, a part of an overall accountability process that ensures our children are learning.

However, we have a high-stakes, single-measure testing program in our state. It is a program that is creating more questions than answers.

The research is clear: children in small classes learn better. They are less likely to drop out. They are better behaved. And they have higher grade-point averages. That's why millions of Floridians went to the polls just a few years ago and demanded that the Legislature fix the problem of overcrowded classrooms.

But today, many in the Legislature and in school administration continue to attempt to find ways to undo the class-size amendment. How many times and in how many different venues must we continue to fight about this? How many more millions of dollars will be spent by those determined to defy the judgment of Florida's voters? We all hear about **achievement gaps**, and they are a key part of the education conversation. But it's well past the time for us to move beyond a conversation and toward a vision of what our schools should look like in the future and make them a reality.

The term "achievement gap" is often defined as the differences between the test scores of minority and/or low-income students and the test scores of their peers. But achievement gaps in test scores affect many different groups. Some groups may trail at particular points – boys in the early years, girls in high school math and science. Differences between the scores of students with different backgrounds are evident on large-scale standardized tests. Test score gaps often lead to longer-term gaps, including high school and college completion and ultimately the kinds of jobs students secure as adults.

Florida’s teachers and support professionals believe that there are seven elements needed for closing the achievement gaps and raising achievement levels for all students.

One...a readiness to learn.

Two...high expectations.

Three...quality conditions.

Four...accountability (note I’ve said it twice now... I’m serious about it).

Five...parental involvement.

Six...funding (if the Governor and Legislators won’t increase it right now, I certainly hope they will keep their word and hold education “harmless”).

And seven...qualified staff.

That number seven is certainly a key, and it goes well beyond the issue of closing the achievement gap. It goes to the core of making every Florida public school a great school.

Here is the stark reality that we are facing today: teachers are paid less than those who work in other professions requiring similar education and responsibilities. In fact, teachers in Florida make \$6000.00 per year less than their peers in Georgia. Low teacher pay comes at a high cost for schools and kids, who lose good teachers to better-paying professions.

Consider this. 20% percent of new public school teachers leave the profession by the end of the first year, and almost half leave within five years. That’s right. One in two new teachers leave the profession within five years. Could you imagine running a successful business with this type of employee turnover? And pay-related turnover is especially high for minorities, males, and teachers under the age of 30.

Having highly qualified teachers is essential to student success — but how can we expect bright, qualified young people of the future to be lured into a profession with wages that start low and fail to keep pace with comparable careers?

If you ask a young teacher what drew them to the profession, they will tell you a lot of things. They will talk about an inspirational teacher who changed their life. They will talk about continuing a family tradition of teaching. They will talk about their desire to impact the lives of young people and help shape the future. And they’ll talk about a desire to give something back to their local neighborhood and community. You will never hear a young teacher talk about going into teaching to make a lot of money.

However, in today's world, our young people—and all the rest of us, as well—are facing immense economic pressures. Health care costs are out of control. Credit card debt is piling up. And what it cost me in gas just to get here today is practically a day's wage for some low-income, blue-collar families both in Florida. So, at some point, all those altruistic motives that our young teachers give for their career choice collide, head-on with basic realities like paying the rent, buying a home, taking their own kids to see the doctor, and filling the tank with gas. And as those realities become more and more clear, the best and the brightest young people are drawn away from teaching and lured into other professions. And that is a crisis for education.

Florida and the nation will be confronting a severe teacher shortage for the next decade. By 2010, the U.S. Department of Education predicts that 1 million new teachers will be needed in our nation's public schools. In the same time period, Florida will have almost 150,000 vacancies as estimated by the Legislature's Office of Economic and Demographic Research (EDR). Furthermore, Florida will be competing with other fast-growing states and states with greater financial resources.

Florida cannot afford to focus simply on hiring new teachers. And, it cannot afford to hire these teachers with only short-term schemes and bonuses.

To succeed, equal attention must be paid to keeping these teachers once they have been hired and equal attention must be paid to the teachers we already have.

We know professional, skilled staff and certified teachers are critical in helping students attain the highest levels of achievement. Recruiting and retaining those kinds of professionals requires professional pay.

But there is another core issue that I would like to turn to, which should be of direct concern to every one of us in this room: Florida's high **drop-out rate**. There is an interesting argument underway in Florida. Depending on what numbers you believe, there are those who argue that only approximately 60% of our students graduate from high school. And then there is a more optimistic group who believe that we graduate approximately 70% of our students. I would argue that this is one of the most ridiculous and unproductive arguments that we could possibly have.

Let's face it: whether the number is 60% or 70%, it still means that we are losing roughly one-third of our children. That's one-in-three children failing to complete their high school education in a world in which education makes the difference between success and failure. And if that doesn't outrage you at a moral level, just think about the economic consequences that we face as a state as a result. I'm sure that the concept of "return on investment" is not a foreign one to this crowd. In fact, I'm sure it drives most of the decisions you make in your business dealings. Well, let's consider the concept of return on education for a moment, because education is an investment that generates substantial returns. Investments in our public schools generate tremendous returns for individuals, communities, and the state itself.

Statistics tells us—and various studies have demonstrated—that new investments in education not only generate substantial returns, but also mean significant savings in reduced crime and other social costs. And those benefits are both personal and global. For example, education at every level increases lifetime earnings.

A 2003 review of economic studies by the *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis* found that preschool can provide a “12 percent annual return, after inflation—that’s better than the stock market and other social programs.” And a *1999 RAND* report held that the positive effects of college education on lifetime earnings holds true regardless of ethnic group or gender. And every level of academic achievement increases individual earning power.

But if you’re more concerned about crime and social problems, consider the statistics that demonstrate that investments in education result in reduced crime and social costs. Here are just a few:

For every \$1 invested in after school programs, there is an estimated savings of \$3 in reduced crime and welfare costs. For every \$1 invested in quality preschool programs, \$7 would be saved as a result of reduced dropout rates, lower teen pregnancy rates, and less drug use and criminal violence. And keeping potential dropouts in schools just one additional year can reduce murder and assault rates by 30%, car thefts by 20%, arson by 13%, and burglary and larceny rates by 6%.

Clearly, return on education includes safer and stronger communities!

And we know that quality education boosts home values in neighborhoods and communities. For example, a \$1 increase in per-pupil spending increases aggregate per-pupil housing values by \$20. And according to the *Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia*, homebuyers favor neighborhoods with higher per pupil expenditures than other similar neighborhoods. And when it comes to economic development, return on education is dramatic. Quality education attracts business to a community and a state. In fact, *Money* magazine identified an educated workforce as one of the top five characteristics common to “winning cities”.

Quality-of-life is the most influential location decision-making factor for businesses. And economic development professionals consistently rank education at or near the top of the list.

In addition, the *Brookings Institute* found that 72% of business leaders report workforce quality as the single most significant factor in choosing where to locate. Even tax incentives were less important than education in location decisions. And we all know why. Quality public schools create the skilled and knowledgeable workforce necessary to perform tomorrow’s jobs and help Florida’s economy grow. The jobs of the new economy require educated workers who can adapt to rapidly changing technologies and communicate effectively with their peers.

In closing today, I want to say just a word about the current economic and political climate that we face today. I've spent a lot of time lately looking at a potential \$1.2 billion dollar shortfall in our state's revenue projections; education's share of this projected shortfall is approximately \$400 million. On top of that, we have before us a ballot initiative that would take a projected \$7 billion out of education over the next 5 years if it should pass.

Again, I want you to listen closely to what I'm about to say. The Florida Education Association supports tax relief for Florida's citizens but I cannot in good conscious support a proposal that destroys the stable revenue flow that provides the financial foundation of our states public education system. I will not trade that foundation for a variable revenue stream based solely upon sales tax collections that will inevitably hurt the poorest among us.

I say this to you not only as President of the Florida Education Association but also as a homeowner. And be assured, I represent teachers and education support professionals that are homeowners. All the while, I hear Governor Crist, Senator President Pruitt and Speaker Rubio say that education will be "held harmless". Unless there is a "new math" that I simply don't understand. There simply is no way that these men can make these cuts and keep their word. Choices are being made that will impact the quality of life for all Floridians and some are using this opportunity to hype their own political agendas and ambitions.

I respectfully ask them following question: How do you hold education harmless, invest in the critical four things that I've outlined and enact both the projected budget cuts and this ballot initiative?

As another school year begins, the challenges faced by our state's public school employees are great. The Florida Education Association is proud to represent those professionals. We are proud to be the leading advocate for strong, effective public schools. We are equally proud to be a leading voice in advocating for Florida's children. I'm proud to have the honor of leading an organization that has been doing this work in Florida since 1886.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of being with you today.