

MCALLEN AFT NEWS

McAllen AFT, 1500 Dove, McAllen, TX

January 2014

Volume 21 Issue 6

Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education: Our Schools. Our Solutions. by Chris Ardis

A large banner with those words, *RECLAIMING THE PROMISE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION: OUR SCHOOLS. OUR SOLUTIONS*, hung at the front of the conference room at Legacy in Edinburg for a dynamic presentation by American Federation of Teachers president, Randi Weingarten. Randi, recognized nationwide and even internationally for her expertise in the field of education and her determination to reclaim the promise, represents 1.5 million AFT members nationwide.

The event began with a spectacular performance by the Palmview High School mariachi group. One year ago, this group played at President Obama's inauguration. These talented student-musicians wowed the crowd with their incredible musical and cultural performance.

Texas Senator Eddie Lucio was the first to speak to the crowd. "The most influential group on the face of the earth is educators," he said. "I'm waiting for you to flex your muscles." Randi stepped forward, and I was immediately struck by how tiny she is. The gavel looked even bigger next to her. With a big smile on her face, Randi thanked Sen. Lucio and told the crowd she would use it first at the next AFT convention and second when Texas teachers get collective bargaining.

J.J. Luna, union representative for La Joya's AFT office, spoke about their successes and the strength of their membership. He then introduced Ruth Skow. Ruth shared several issues with the crowd, most notably how critical it is for teachers to let our voices be heard regarding Social Security Fairness.

"We need that loophole opened," Ruth said.

Ruth also touted the PCI Clinic, available to all MISD employees, thanks to the work of McAllen AFT and the continued support of the MISD school board. Ruth spoke of McAllen AFT's commitment to librarians and to better pay and conditions for district support staff. She also told the crowd she is anxiously awaiting the decision from a Travis County judge regarding the \$1.2 million "step case." The district has appealed three decisions (by another Travis County judge and two Commissioners of Education) in favor of MISD teachers for money owed them from the 2008-2009 and the 2009-2010 school years.

Ruth passed the mic to Javier Olivarez, organizing chair of Edinburg's "soon-to-be AFT local." Javier then introduced Ray McMurrey, president of Corpus Christi AFT, who spoke about how they established a Community Engagement group to get involved in the legislative process during the last legislative session.

Ray introduced Louis Malfaro, second-in-command (after Linda Bridges) at the state office (Texas AFT). Louis gave high praise to Ruth and the other local presidents and representatives. During his brief talk, one of his most



School Board Member—Sam Saldivar attended meeting with Randi Weingarten.



McAllen AFT

1500 Dove

McAllen, TX 78504

956-682-1143

mcallenaft2@yahoo.com

<http://tx.aft.org/mcallen>

Reclaiming the Promise

aft Uniting for Public Schools

powerful statements was, “When we are organized, we are the most important forces for education.”

Finally, it was Randi’s turn to address the crowd. I immediately noticed two things—though she is tiny in stature, her presence is powerful, and though one might expect her to be aloof and perhaps even arrogant, given her lofty position as the spokesperson for teachers and other educators nationwide, she is instead the exact opposite. She is warm and genuine, hugging freely and even stopping her presentation to bend down to speak to a little girl in the audience. No wonder when Louis was introducing her, he said, “She’s smart and she’s got heart.”

Here are some of Randi’s most noteworthy statements:

The obstacles in Texas are ominous. The legislature “took an ax” to the education budget at a time when Texas has the highest rate of increase in student population, many of them at-risk students.

“Teachers have been treated like ‘you know what.’ Kids have been treated even worse.”

“We can’t do it alone anymore... We’re an island alone.” This, Randi said, was the rationale for hiring organizers across the state to help in the fight to reclaim the promise.

“How can we teach our kids to have loving and trusting relationships if we aren’t respected ourselves?”

“Everything we get, we have to fight for.”

“What happened to, ‘If you work hard and play by the rules, you’ll be treated fairly’? We need to take our anger and make it constructive.”

“Big steps start by organizing members.” One of Randi’s overriding themes is that more teachers have to get involved in the fight if we truly want to reclaim this promise.

Although there was a stage at the front of the room, Randi never stood on it. Rather, she moved about the room as she spoke, her passion for education—and for students and educators—evident in every word she spoke.

At the end of her speech, State Representative Sergio Munoz came forward. “We have to give teachers the ability to teach,” he said, “not just for a test but for their future.” Randi spoke of Rep. Munoz’s strong voting record on education issues and urged the audience to vote for him during the upcoming election.

I have read countless articles written by and written about Randi. Seeing her in person was both invigorating and inspiring. Her words need to echo in the ears of educators nationwide:

Big steps start by organizing members.

So, too, should the words spoken by Sen. Lucio:

I’m waiting for you to flex your muscles.



McAllen AFT—Members and Staff that attended reception for Randi Weingarten— National President of AFT.