The most influential voices in American education during the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century were surely Horace Mann and John Dewey, respectively. But who ranks as the most consequential figure of the past 50 years? One of the many leaders who claimed the mantle of “education president”? A particularly influential U.S. secretary of education? A renowned education theorist? A pathbreaking state education official or schools superintendent?

Consider, instead, the late Albert Shanker—the president of a teacher union and not even the largest one at that. Writing in the New Republic, Sara Mosle called Shanker, the legendary head of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) from 1974 to 1997, “our Dewey, the most important American educator in half a century.” The notion is astonishing—akin to claiming that the president of the United Auto Workers was responsible for the most important developments in the American automobile industry—yet well justified.

As one of the founding fathers of teacher unionism in New York City during the early 1960s, Shanker helped to create a movement that has become an enormous, if not the dominant, force in K–12 public education. During the 1980s and 1990s, he sought to transform teacher unions into a powerful voice for education reform, proposing ideas that were highly unconventional for a union president. In fact, the modern
accountability movement, right through to the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, owes much to Shanker’s relentless calls for higher standards, assessments, and consequences for poor performance. Shanker was also an early proponent of public school choice, charter schools (some even credit him with the idea), rigorous knowledge and skills testing for teachers, and extra pay for master teachers. His support for these reforms sharply distinguished him from the leadership of the nation’s largest teacher union, the National Education Association (NEA). By openly acknowledging the shortcomings of public schools and embracing innovation, he became a much more credible and effective voice for public education than the NEA or other defenders of the status quo.

Bipartisan Praise
Shanker’s effectiveness as a leader stemmed from his unique combination of gifts. He was a union leader who could quote Aristotle and an intellectual who knew how to run a meeting. His innovative thinking drew invitations to teach from Hunter College and Harvard. Shanker was asked to join the boards of the Spencer Foundation and the Twentieth Century Fund, “one of only a handful of labor leaders to serve as a foundation trustee,” one expert noted. At the same time, Shanker transformed the AFT, Education Week marveled, “into a labor union that often acts like a think tank.”

He did not always come up with original ideas, but he took good ones and spread them through the 1,300 “Where We Stand” columns that he wrote in his lifetime; the column, a paid advertisement now written by Shanker’s successor, still runs in the “Week in Review” section of the Sunday New York Times. “The impact was extraordinary,” said the late U.S. senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. “Union leaders in those days rarely wrote essays, still less felicitous, thoughtful analysis of public policies.” Today every leader with some institutional money, including the presidents of the NEA and the AFT, seems to have a paid column, but none reads like Shanker’s “Where We Stand.” Shanker’s intellect and skills as a debater were backed by a forceful personality and real-world power. His power, in turn, was bolstered by longevity: while he ruled the AFT for 23 straight years, the president of the NEA is term-limited.

Shanker gained a hearing for his ideas from both liberals and conservatives, not by taking moderate positions that consistently split the difference, but by embracing a coherent philosophy that sometimes led to “liberal” policy conclusions, other times to “conservative” ones. Shanker allied with liberals on trade unionism, public schools, and economic equality, while finding common cause with conservatives on issues like standards, public school choice, racial preferences, bilingual education, and communism. At the height of the war between Ronald Reagan and organized labor, the AFT invited the president to speak at its convention, and Reagan accepted.

To be sure, Shanker’s legacy is still a matter of some debate. Critics contend that Shanker’s words and his union’s actions were often worlds apart, particularly during Shanker’s later years as president of the AFT. For instance, in his 1997 book The Teacher Unions, Myron Lieberman argued, “The neoconservative notion that the AFT is a more enlightened union or more hospitable to educational reform or innovation [than the NEA] resulted from AFT president Albert Shanker’s ability to manipulate media, not to any substantive differences between the unions.”

While it is true that the AFT’s local unions, locked in hardball urban political struggles and pressing mainly bread-and-butter issues, often strayed from Shanker’s bold vision, his leadership on a variety of issues exerted broad influence—mostly for the better—on the course of education reform. His weekly “Where We Stand” columns did so much more than merely cheerlead for public education and nurture the mom-and-apple-pie view of teachers, which is what one might expect from an advertorial run by a labor union. Shanker was as apt to criticize public schools as he was to condemn those who would eviscerate them, as likely to call for higher standards for teachers as he was to protect their tenure rights. His influence can still be felt most palpably in four areas: teacher unionism; the standards movement; the choice movement; and the adoption of reforms to improve teacher quality.

Organization Man
Until the fledgling United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in
New York City won collective-bargaining rights in 1961, teacher unions were impotent. It had been considered pointless to organize teachers, or other public employees for that matter, because it generally was (and is) illegal for public servants to go on strike. The NEA, then a loose professional association, opposed collective bargaining as “unprofessional” and fought hard against the principle in New York City and elsewhere.

Shanker, an official with the UFT during the 1950s and 1960s, and his colleagues at the AFT sought to test those assumptions. Shanker had been a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at Columbia University, but he quit for lack of funds and became a substitute teacher in the New York City public schools, where he had once been a star debater at the elite Stuyvesant High School. He soon became a union organizer and, in the years to follow, he would serve two jail sentences for his unlawful strike activities. Militancy worked, however, and teacher unionization spread rapidly: the AFT signed up thousands of new members. This forced the much larger NEA to change its position on collective bargaining. Now teachers are the most unionized sector in the workforce. While trade unionism was in general decline, the AFT grew from 71,000 members in 1961 to close to one million at the time of Shanker’s death in 1997. He was, wrote Mosle, “one of [the 20th century’s greatest] labor organizers.” The UFT’s example helped to spark unionization among other civil servants, from about 5 percent of public workers in the early 1960s to 43 percent today. At Shanker’s memorial service in 1997, Daniel Patrick Moynihan remarked, “If, as Emerson wrote, an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man, the public employees unions are singularly the mark of Al Shanker’s inspired life.”

Shanker acknowledged that the goals of teacher unions and the needs of students and effective schools could sometimes come into conflict. Initially he focused on traditional union activities: building the membership and securing better salaries, benefits, and protections for teachers. But as the AFT and NEA grew entrenched and powerful, Shanker attempted to recast teacher unionism as a force that looked beyond teachers’ narrow interests. Along the way, he transformed his image from union hothead to educational statesman. Shanker’s key insight was that he could motivate his members to push for better public schools by holding up the threat of school vouchers.

Shanker realized that the transformation of vouchers from a theoretical idea proposed by conservative economists in the 1950s to a viable political threat by the late 1970s gave union leaders the opportunity to engage in public school reform as never before. It was not only an opportunity, but a necessity. After all, if the public schools continued to underperform, the nation’s confidence in public education itself—which to Shanker was both a positive democratic force in society and the root of union leverage—would dissipate. Shanker thundered at union delegates: “It is as much your duty to preserve public education as it is to negotiate a good contract.”

Setting the Standard

As part of his reformist message, Shanker became a leading promoter of the standards movement. Indeed, no one is more responsible for its emergence than Albert Shanker. Today standards lie at the core of education reform packages put forth by presidents as ideologically disparate as George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, but the idea was not always so widely accepted. For years, standards were opposed by a coalition of liberals and conservatives, though for different reasons. Liberals worried that poor and minority students would be penalized by high-stakes tests, while conservatives wanted to preserve the “local control” of schools.

The turning point came in 1983, when the Reagan administration’s National Commission on Excellence in Education issued the A Nation at Risk report (see the Spring 2003 issue of Education Next for a retrospective on the Risk report). The report bemoaned the nation’s declining test scores and the absence of a serious curriculum in American public schools. While the NEA and the rest of the education establishment lined up to assail the report, AFT president Shanker shocked observers by endorsing the report’s findings. In so doing, he helped to secure Risk’s lasting influence. “It was vital that someone with stature step up,” said Milton Goldberg, the commission’s executive director. “Al Shanker never wavered on that issue, and the rest of the education community and public finally caught up to him.”

Without Shanker, the AFT was likely to have joined the opposition, potentially crippling the report. Current AFT president Sandra Feldman explained to journalist Sara Mosle that when advance copies of Risk were circulated on the eve of a union convention in 1983, “We all had this visceral reaction to it. You know, This is horrible. They’re attacking teachers.” Everyone was watching Al to hear his response. When Al...
finished reading the report, he closed the book and looked up at all of us and said, “The report is right, and not only that, we should say that before our members.” And that’s what he did. It was a really courageous thing for him to do.” The AFT had always backed tough disciplinary standards (which was clearly in the self-interest of teachers), but the new focus on academics would require much more of, and place greater pressure on, rank-and-file teachers.

A Nation at Risk helped to launch the modern education reform movement. Beginning in the late 1980s, Shanker pushed hard for state and federal legislation to raise academic standards, and he kept the pressure on for educational testing and consequences for poor performance. He reminded officials that when he was a teacher and gave an exam or quiz, the students always asked, “Does it count?”

During the 1994 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which ultimately forced the states to begin developing their accountability systems, Shanker was a staunch proponent of tough standards, and penned a pivotal article blasting a proposal to water down the bill. After President Clinton devoted much of his 1997 State of the Union address to standards, he called the then-ailing Shanker and told him, “Al, this is your agenda. We should have listened to you sooner.”

Whereas the NEA leadership supported bilingual education and racial preferences, Shanker raised objections to both, in part because he thought they held minority students to lower standards. Even today, the AFT continues to lend some support to standards-based reform, while the NEA has opposed high-stakes testing, supported parents who boycott tests, and funded researchers to try to undermine standards-based reform.

Shanker was committed to a strong union movement for the same reason he was a strong cold warrior and a promoter of common standards: in his view, they all served democratic values.

Freedom with Accountability
Shanker later made an inspired link between his push for standards and the nascent idea of charter schools, publicly funded schools that would operate independently of school districts but be subject to tough performance requirements. In 1996, Shanker told Mosle, “If we had a system of standards and assessments in place, then as far as I’m concerned every school should be a charter school.” In Shanker’s view, these schools should be set up by groups of teachers and parents who wanted to try innovative educational approaches. This vision differs somewhat from that of the management of charter schools by privately run corporations, a trend that the AFT has opposed in recent years.

Shanker began championing charter schools as early as 1988, though his contribution is a matter of some debate. Brookings Institution scholar Diane Ravitch says Shanker “initiated the idea of charter schools,” while the authors of Charter Schools in Action credit Shanker with coining the term “charter schools” after visiting a school in Cologne, Germany. Others note that Shanker himself attributed the idea to a retired educator named Ray Budde and argue that Shanker’s role was mainly to disseminate and popularize it.

Before charter schools, there were district-run magnet schools and other forms of public school choice, of which Shanker was an early proponent. In April 1985, he argued that “the greatest possible choice among public schools” should be provided as a way to promote a diversity of school offerings and to better match the interests of individual teachers and students. The key difference between public school choice and vouchers, he insisted, is that under public school choice, “everyone competes under the same ground rules.”

With the NEA opposed to schools of choice and charter schools at the time, both reforms might have died without Shanker’s support. Instead, they have become significant parts of the education landscape. Public school choice has exploded to include more than five million students, a number that will surely rise under the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Charter schools served no students in 1990, but today they educate more than 700,000.

Alienating the Troops
Even more controversial among teachers than Shanker’s advocacy of high standards and public school choice was his embrace of a series of reforms intended to improve the quality of the teaching profession.

To attract good teachers, conservatives had long argued for “merit pay” as a means of rewarding superior teachers. To
maintain solidarity, however, teacher unions typically oppose paying different salaries to teachers who possess the same amounts of experience and education. Shanker offered a compromise. Instead of basing pay on the judgments of school administrators, which might be open to favoritism, Shanker called for a system of board certification, like that used for doctors. Shanker’s idea, which was first outlined by teacher union gadfly Myron Lieberman, became the private, nonprofit National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Many states and school districts now provide bonuses to teachers who obtain board certification. Former North Carolina governor Jim Hunt, a prime mover behind the idea of board certification, argues, “More than any other single person, Al Shanker was the founder of the [group].”

Shanker supported tenure protections for teachers after a three- or four-year probationary period because he believed that it was an important tool for attracting high-quality teachers and protecting academic freedom. But he argued that tenure should not protect bad teachers and that unions should be at the forefront of “removing those who are incompetent, with due process.” In particular, Shanker supported a highly controversial experiment of the local union in Toledo, Ohio. The union had worked with the school district to institute peer review, a program where top-flight teachers evaluated new teachers and even veteran teachers who had severe problems. In 1982, Shanker invited the president of Toledo’s teacher union, Dal Lawrence, to speak about his program to the AFT’s executive council in Washington. Lawrence said he wasn’t sure if he would be praised or reprimanded. “Here we were, a teachers union, and we were evaluating and even recommending the non-renewal and terminations of teachers,” Lawrence recalls. After he gave his presentation, many council members were harshly critical. Then Shanker, who had remained silent for much of the discussion, told the council, “I think you’re missing something here.” He argued that other professions took responsibility for maintaining high standards among their members, and he endorsed the Toledo model.

Likewise, Shanker shocked observers in 1985 by backing a rigorous National Teacher Competency Exam for new teachers, similar to that used by the legal and medical professions. The NEA opposed a national standard, arguing that state-by-state minimum requirements were sufficient. But Shanker derided existing state-level teacher tests as the equivalent of asking doctors to pass a test in “elementary biology.” He backed up the proposal with a declaration that the AFT would limit membership to those who passed.

Progress on Shanker’s trio of teacher-quality initiatives has been slow. In 1996, Shanker told journalist Thomas Toch, “Convincing people to change has been a damn difficult thing to do. I would go into a state, talk up reform, and as soon as I left, the union attorney would come in and say, ‘We’ve got a great tenure law, let’s keep it.’” Peer review is limited to about 50 sites across the nation, and many states still certify teachers with weak exams—or none at all. National board certification stands at 24,000 teachers. On these reforms, Shanker was more successful at stoking the dialogue than winning over the membership.

On the whole, however, Shanker’s strategic vision paid off. By acknowledging the trouble with public schools and advocating radical reforms, he gave a positive voice to teachers’ concerns, keeping them in touch with the larger political dialogue. The tactic of the education establishment, to routinely call “for more money to address problems that they frequently argued didn’t exist,” notes Toch, was far less credible than Shanker’s approach: fighting “to change public education in order to preserve it.” When conservatives said public schools lacked the high standards of private schools, Shanker agreed, and he pushed for reform. When they said it was unfair to trap poor kids in bad schools, he agreed, and he championed public school choice as a better alternative. When conservatives criticized bilingual education and extreme multiculturalism for fracturing the nation’s social cohesion, the union leader concurred, fought those programs, and argued that private school vouchers would promote even further balkanization.

Shanker was committed to a strong union movement for the same reason he was a strong cold warrior and a promoter of common standards: in his view, they all served democratic values. In this sense, then, Albert Shanker had more in common with Horace Mann and John Dewey than just exerting a profound influence on American education.

—Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, is writing a biography of Albert Shanker. His most recent book is All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice (Brookings, 2001).