

Teachers Unions as Agents of Change

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Over the last five decades, every president has made huge declarations and big promises when it comes to transforming education in America. Every parent, from then until now has asked themselves one vital question—“Is my child getting a great education?” Regardless of socioeconomic status, it’s a concern that troubles all parents, and the answer lies in the middle of a raging national debate over education in the United States.

Documentarian Davis Guggenheim paints a grim picture of the education system in our nation in his new and controversial documentary, *Waiting for “Superman”*. From his purview, he dissects the issues holding American schoolchildren back; from endless red tape, to bad teachers who can’t be fired, to an educational system that is out of step with the demands of the 21st century global economy.

While Mr. Guggenheim’s portrayal is oversimplified, the movie has triggered a national dialogue on the issue of public education in our country. It has also provoked some fear and misplaced outrage and unfairly targets teachers’ unions as not only against real reform but perpetrators of the status quo. This paper is designed to dispel these erroneous theories and put on display the ideas and incredible work that educators and unions are doing across the nation.

For well over a century, the National Education Association has been at the forefront of education reform and advocating for great public schools for every student. We know that the problem of America’s public schools is complicated, but they are not insurmountable. While some public schools face major challenges, they are also our greatest hope for the future of our nation. We believe that education is a shared responsibility requiring collaboration from anyone who cares deeply about this issue. But in order to collaborate, we must first substitute scapegoating for partnerships and partisanship for the opportunity to do what is best for our students.

Union Led Transformation

Over the last month, the public has been inundated with negative portrayals of teachers and their unions. “Waiting for Superman,” NBC’s Education Nation summit, and other media coverage has vilified teachers and portrayed their unions as the obstacles to school improvement. We at the NEA challenge that assumption by highlighting how union-led transformation in communities like Evansville, Denver, Seattle, Columbus, Oklahoma City, Hillsborough, is making the grade all across the United States.

In **Evansville, Indiana**, educators concluded that low-performing schools needed a different approach. So, in partnership with the school district, the union developed the Evansville Equity Schools Project. The project includes a professional development academy which provides top-notch training for teachers in the three lowest-performing schools. Teachers can’t teach at the schools unless they attend the academy, take 40 hours of training on Saturdays and pass an examination.

In **Denver, Colorado**, the Math and Science Leadership Academy, designed and run by teachers, uses collaborative peer planning time to analyze data and figure out how to better meet the academic needs of students. Sixty percent of MSLA students are English language learners and close to 90 percent receive free or reduced-price lunches. The school aims to attract and retain accomplished teachers in math and science, and so far, the strategy appears to be working. MSLA has been receiving 30 applications for each teaching position.

In **Seattle, Washington**, the Seattle Education Association, in a display of strength and solidarity, was able to get a fair and transparent contract that takes a great step toward identifying high quality teaching. In recent negotiations, a district bargaining team agreed with its teaching staff, that collaboration, not confrontation, is a more effective way to bring historic change to public education in Seattle.

Bargainers for the local union suggested that test scores could be used appropriately to help identify teachers who may be struggling so that they can build the skills they need. Seattle’s contract creates a framework where teachers in every classroom must be exceptional. It encourages good teachers to become even better. It’s an historic change in the national debate over academic excellence, accountability and avoiding the misuse of student test data.

In **Columbus, Ohio**, a union-led effort is working to close achievement gaps by bringing service-learning and 21st century skills to the classroom. A task force—which included the union—convened a community conversation which led to radical change at Linden-McKinley High School. A video recruiting students to the transformed and renamed Linden-McKinley STEM

Academy emphasizes the appeal of certain aspects of the school's new curriculum—field trips, designing video games and building robots.

In **Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**, a vibrant combination of targeted academic programs, parental involvement, and professional development—all union-championed—are helping to address the issue of low academic achievement among Hispanic students. The results are impressive: the number of graduating Hispanic students rose by nearly 70 percent between 2008 and 2009, and student performance on end-of-year achievement tests went up substantially.

In **Hillsborough, Florida** there is a groundbreaking partnership between the Hillsborough County Public Schools and the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association that will overhaul how teachers are trained, evaluated and compensated. The Gates Foundation awarded Hillsborough \$100 million for the Empowering Effective Teachers initiative so educators and administrators will be able to see what does or does not affect the bottom line: student learning.

Those who dare suggest that unions are obstructionists are wrong; in fact, the opposite is true. As you can see, unions are leading the way in collaboration with parents, communities, school districts and the students themselves.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

At the national level, our much talked about law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is scheduled to be renewed. From its inception, ESEA was enacted to address inequities in educational opportunities for poor and minority students. With the 2002 reauthorized version (No Child Left Behind-NCLB), ESEA became more focused on standardized testing, and ushered in the test, label, punish, blame era in public education. NEA is working with a broad-based coalition to get the next version of ESEA right.

Our vision for ESEA is a federal law that embraces the reality that our public education system is critical to democracy, and its purpose must be to: maximize the achievement, skills, opportunities, and potential of all students by promoting their strengths and addressing their needs; and ensure that all students are prepared to thrive in a democratic society and a diverse and rapidly changing world as knowledgeable, creative, and engaged citizens and lifelong learners.

We are committed to working collaboratively with the Obama administration, legislators, and other education stakeholders to overhaul this critical legislation. Swift action to rewrite and

renew ESEA is in the best interests of children and educators. The need for change is indisputable.

The current system – where almost one-third of high school freshman don't graduate – is failing to meet the needs of too many students. And educators are chafing under a system that unfairly measures schools and students based solely on test scores. ESEA reauthorization should truly support a world-class education system that prepares students to become critical thinkers, problem solvers, and globally competent.

A revamped ESEA should encourage and reward innovation, provide for greater flexibility and better quality tests, ensure multiple ways of measuring school quality and student learning, and elevate the profession of teaching. We will be working with the Department of Education and Congress to shape policies that will do just that.

Additionally, we also believe that the law must acknowledge the importance of families and communities in attaining student achievement. ESEA must encourage, promote and support family involvement and community involvement. Everyone knows that parents are important to a child's experience in school. We all have an image in our minds of parents dropping a kindergarten student or a first-grader at school on the first day. And most parents are involved – at first.

For years, people who understand the learning process have known that education should be an integral and vital part of a student's everyday life. John Dewey wrote about the frustration of a student's "inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school ... within the school itself."

One way to break down that barrier between school and daily life is by engaging the community. This is why NEA is a charter member of the Coalition for Community Schools. And it is why our principles for ESEA reauthorization support community school initiatives. Simply put, it is time we take family and community engagement as seriously as we take curriculum, standards, and tests.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform analyzed multiple research studies conducted over a six-year period, and found that family-school-community partnerships consistently contribute to better attendance, higher test scores, completing high school, and aspiring to a higher education.

NEA Foundation/Achievement Gaps

Our mission at NEA is “to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education.” Sometimes it seems that so-called “reformers” are doing everything possible to prevent that from happening. Instead of uniting our members and the public, they try to divide our members and the public by portraying us in a false light, claiming that our only interest is advocating for our members.

Well, we do fight for our members – and they deserve a strong voice. But we also fight for the more than 50 million students who attend public schools. That’s exactly why our members created the NEA Foundation forty-one years ago (1969). Since then, the Foundation has offered programs and grants to increase student achievement.

The current initiative to close the Achievement Gaps is continuing that work. For the past six years, the Foundation has supported innovative programs by NEA members in Seattle, Milwaukee, and Hamilton County, Tennessee. This year new programs were added in Columbus, Durham and Springfield, Massachusetts. Each one of these programs is unique; the approach was not imposed, but decided at the local level. One thing they all have in common, though, is a collaborative approach. You see, while some of our critics might try to drive a wedge between our members and the public, the fact is, all across the country, our members are working together with district management and others in their communities who share our goal of Closing the Achievement Gaps. This union-led collaboration is the key to transforming public education. There is no way to achieve transformation on a system-wide level without us!

Priority Schools

Turning around lower-performing schools is a high priority for the 3.2 million members of the National Education Association. By leading permanent changes in these Priority Schools, we will transform the lives of tens of thousands of students by significantly raising academic achievement.

Our commitment includes a vow to work side-by-side with communities and with policymakers in state capitals, in Congress and the Obama administration; to partner in pursuit of innovative programs to measure student success and teacher quality; and to fight to attract and keep the best educators and necessary resources for the schools of greatest need.

The Priority Schools Campaign grew out of a mandate from NEA’s Annual Representative Assembly, where more than 9,000 delegates voted to focus resources on informing and engaging members in collaborative work to transform lower-performing schools, our priority schools.

Our members are committed to this, but we know we can't do it alone. So we are creating ways to collaborate in fundamentally different ways as partners – labor with management, educators with administrators, and educators with their communities. We're building a collaborative model of work.

You can learn more about our Priority Schools Campaign by visiting our website at neaprioritieschools.org.

Race To The Top (RTTT)

The National Education Association shares the Obama administration's goal of fostering innovation and reform to close the gaps in achievement and opportunity in our nation's schools. While NEA supports the overarching goals of Race to the Top and its inclusion in the federal budget, we continue to be concerned about meeting the needs of all students.

At a time when state and local budgets are the tightest in a generation, RTTT funding is unpredictable. It creates winners and losers, instead of promoting the ideal of equal opportunity. This competitive approach is a dramatic shift from a stable, consistent source of federal support toward an approach that will force states to compete on an uneven playing field for scarce resources.

And the potential ramifications of moving from formula aid to competitive grants do not bode well for the ability of ESEA to deal with issues of equity. It also puts school districts in rural states at a severe disadvantage since they do not have the resources or staff to apply for all of these competitive grants. Deciding whether or not to pursue Race to the Top funds has been a state-based decision involving multiple players.

NEA is not the only voice speaking up when it comes to RTTT. This summer, an important coalition of 7 civil right organizations including the NAACP, the National Urban League and Rainbow Push Coalition also weighed in. This coalition criticized competitive grants, such as RTTT, because of how grants provoke inequities for high needs students and districts. The coalition questioned charters, highlighting the lack of evidence that charters are better than other schools. And the coalition questioned the Administration's "fire and rehire" approach to turning around schools.

Jobs Bill

On August 10, 2010, President Barack Obama signed the *Education Jobs and Medicaid Assistance Act*. This \$26 billion jobs bill was created to save 300,000 police, teachers and other public service jobs from layoff and provide state governments with needed financial support. It is estimated that over 150,000 teacher's jobs were saved because of the legislation.

This never would have happened without the thousands upon thousands of phone calls, e-mails, and personal visits to members of Congress, from our members. The bill was near death on many occasions. But we never gave up. In fact, the more it looked like the bill wouldn't pass, the harder we fought. NEA put together an unprecedented team to work on this bill – a “war room” with staffers from many different departments, from Government Relations to Campaigns and Elections to Public Relations to Interactive Media and more.

They worked together to put together a national campaign called “Speak Up for Education & Kids,” to mobilize educators and anyone else who was concerned about education budget cuts. Our staff did a great job getting this message out – but it was our members who really made the difference.

In the months leading up to the passage of the bill in early August, NEA members from across the country shared their personal stories and concerns about how layoffs and program cutbacks would affect their students. Many visited Washington to lobby their members of Congress, while others expressed their concerns via radio, television, and the Internet.

NEA members galvanized their communities in protest of unfair budget cuts. And after long days in their classrooms they sat down and wrote heartfelt emails to their representatives and senators, imploring them to make students and education a priority. This campaign was impressive. It produced more than 300,000 emails, 100,000 telephone calls and delivered 42,000 postcards to Congressional offices.

Our “Speak Up for Education & Kids” page on Facebook attracted almost 35,000 fans, which used Facebook to keep up with the latest news about the bill. And educationvotes.nea.org, our association's portal for activists, generated more than 60,000 visits and 93,000 page views.

Poverty

One of the critical issues that have been overlooked in the education debate has been poverty. New Census Bureau figures have shown that one in seven Americans live at or below the poverty line, defined as an annual income for a family of four of \$22,000.

Studies have shown that there is a direct connection between poverty and student achievement. Instead of examining the link between family income and test scores, there is an overarching ideology that great educators can overcome many of the social and psychological challenges that children bring into the classroom. While this may occur in some very isolated circumstances, educators in general, do not have the resources or the power to fix many of these problems.

The National Education Association (NEA) contends that solutions are at hand if policymakers, parents, and teachers themselves promote thoughtful and comprehensive strategies to address working conditions, school leadership, and teacher quality.

That belief has prompted the NEA in partnership with the Center for Teaching Quality to release, *Children of Poverty Deserve Great Teachers: One Union's Commitment to Changing the Status Quo*, a report that highlights what is needed to identify and develop teachers and to recruit and retain them for high-needs classrooms.

Part of NEA's "Turn Around for Great Public Schools Initiative," The Children of Poverty Report summarizes NEA's commitment to principled changes in the status quo — signaling its determination to break ground for new teaching policy and strategic partnerships.

The initiative includes an investment of \$1 million per year over six years to develop comprehensive strategies and policies to increase teacher effectiveness in high-needs schools. Everyday across this country countless dedicated, talented teachers and support professionals report to work knowing they will face students with a sobering array of social and economic disadvantages.

Children of Poverty presents solid, proven strategies and policy recommendations that can make a difference for students. It advocates for credible and consistent evaluation processes that could transcend current debates about the role of tenure in the teacher development system. It also offers solutions to recruiting, preparing, supporting, and compensating teachers for high-needs schools.

And lastly, we must address how we support and evaluate are teachers. High-performing countries like Finland place a high value on educators and put much more energy into recruiting, preparing, and supporting good teachers.

While we know that family culture, background, wealth and education have an effect on a child's ability to learn, research has concluded that teachers are the most powerful in-school factor in improving student achievement.

Given the well-recognized need for a more highly skilled workforce and for increased national competitiveness in today's global economy, the importance of top flight teachers for our K-12 schools is clear.

This is not a new idea for the NEA. We have done a lot of work around this issue in the last century and we believe that if a teacher possesses specific skills, knowledge and dispositions, they will have a positive impact on student learning.

Today's policy debates about teacher assessment and evaluation have been mired in a rewards-and-punishment framework that does little to identify or promote quality teaching. Instead, these short-sighted approaches to evaluation encourage "trial and error" systems that lower standards for the profession and rely on subjective, narrow criteria for judging teacher effectiveness.

Nearly everyone agrees that great teachers are critical to student success – and that our schools have not done nearly enough to evaluate teachers accurately and use this information to improve educational quality.

NEA's Teacher Quality Department just released a new white paper on teacher evaluation, titled *Teacher Assessment and Evaluation: NEA's Framework for Transforming Education Systems to Support Effective Teaching and Improve Student Learning*. In this white paper we argue that an evaluation system must be seen as part of a greater educational system (e.g. alignment of hiring, professional development; and aligning teacher preparation programs). We believe that building evaluation systems cannot be seen as a silver bullet. The purpose of an evaluation system is to strengthen the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and the classroom practice of practitioners that will enhance student growth and learning.

We have six principles which we consider very important in building comprehensive, robust evaluation systems comprised of formative and summative components and their role in the teacher evaluation system.

NEA's Transformational Dialogue for Transformation of Public Education

Because the causes of our current educational “crisis” are so complex and deeply embedded, only changes at the most fundamental levels of the system will have lasting results. There is no one quick and simple answer that will provide the total solution.

There is, however, a critical piece which is missing and which is required to realize the full potential of the billions of dollars being invested and the myriad of efforts that are currently underway. The missing piece is a clear and coherent core purpose and a set of core values – a shared core ideology – to which all the stakeholders in the education system are aligned and which would form the foundation on which to re-conceive and rebuild our education system for the future.

To address this “missing piece” NEA has begun a 50-state initiative, where we invite all states interested in public education transformation to participate. At the national level, three parties are collaborating to help make this happen in each of the 50 states. The Knowledge Works Foundation (KWF) of Cincinnati, Ohio will serve the work by holding a constancy of purpose for the whole initiative for many years to come as a funding partner and by leading the effort to attract additional state-based and national funding. The National Education Association sees this as an integral part of the NEA's ongoing process of pursuing its mission.

We are excited about this effort and we hope that it will help us realize systemic change in public education that will transform the public school system into a robust knowledge-era model able to meet the demands of modern society.

Conclusion

The plight of American education crisis did not happen overnight. It took years of neglect and the failure of adults to do what is best for children. We have a unique opportunity right now to change how we think and work together.

We must unite our resources and human capital around ideas that work. And we must stay away from the “scapegoating” model of education reform. That kind of reform doesn't work and it is painfully unproductive.

No organization in America has done more to support and promote quality teaching than the National Education Association. Throughout its long history, the NEA has advanced the profession of teaching and worked toward a goal of a qualified teacher in every classroom.

From being a founding member of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education to supporting the creation of the United States Department of Education to organizing over a dozen independent state teacher standards boards to helping establish the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, NEA has been in the forefront of innovation, research, and policy to support teacher quality.

We must prepare all students for the future with 21st century skills; create enthusiasm for learning and engage all students in the classroom; close achievement gaps and raise achievement for all students; and ensure that all educators have the resources and tools they need to get the job done.

NEA will continue to lead with our vision of a Great Public School for Every Student.