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## NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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### Abstract

This essay profiles the history of the National Education Association of the United States of America. Founded in 1857, the association functioned as a national debating society for a small group of educational leaders for the rest of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, it experienced a wave of feminist opposition to the male leaders, the influence of progressive education, a surge of local emphasis, the challenge of trade unionism in the form of the American Federation of Teachers - AFT -, its own racial desegregation, and participation in the creation of the United States Department of Education. Recently, it has been attacked from the political right, as a facilitator of an intellectually deficient public education system.

Key-words: School administrators, women teachers, trade unionists, desegregation, professional association, administrative progressivism.

### A ASSOCIAÇÃO NACIONAL DE EDUCAÇÃO DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS DA AMÉRICA

### Resumo

Este ensaio apresenta um perfil da história da Associação Nacional de Educação dos Estados Unidos. Fundada em 1857, a associação funcionou como uma sociedade nacional de debates para um pequeno grupo de líderes educacionais pelo restante do século 19. Já no século 20, a mesma vivenciou uma onda de oposição feminista aos líderes masculinos, a influência da educação progressista, uma repentina ênfase localista, o desafio do sindicalismo na forma da Federação Americana de Professores - AFT -, seu próprio processo de dessegregação racial bem como a participação na criação do Ministério da Educação dos Estados Unidos. Recentemente, foi atacada pela direita política por ser vista como a promotora de um sistema de educação pública intelectualmente deficiente.

Palavras-chave: administradores escolares, professoras, sindicalistas, dessegregação, associação profissional, progressismo administrativo.

## LA ASOCIACIÓN NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN DE LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS DE AMÉRICA

### Resumen

Este ensayo presenta un perfil de la historia de la Asociación Nacional de Educación de los Estados Unidos. Fundada en 1857, la asociación funcionó como una sociedad nacional de debates para un pequeño grupo de líderes educacionales por el resto del siglo 19. Ya en el siglo 20, la misma vivenció una onda de oposición feminista a los líderes masculinos, la influencia de la educación progresista, una repentina énfasis localista, el desafío del sindicalismo en la forma de la Federación Americana de Profesores - AFT -, su propio proceso de desagregación racial, bien como la participación en la creación del Ministerio de la Educación de los Estados Unidos. Recientemente fue atacada pela derecha política por ser vista como la promotora de un sistema de educación pública intelectualmente deficiente.

Palabras-clave: administradores escolares, profesoras, sindicalistas, desagregación, asociación profesional, progresismo administrativo.

## ASSOCIATION NATIONAL D'ÉDUCATION DES ETATS-UNIS D'AMERIQUE

### Résumé

Cet essai présente un aspect de l'histoire de l'Association National d'Éducation des États-Unis. Fondée en 1857, cette association a opéré comme une société nationale de débats pour un restreint groupe de représentants éducationnels au loin du 19e siècle. Au 20e siècle, cette même société a témoigné une vague d'opposition féministe contre les représentants masculins, en plus de l'influence de l'éducation progressiste, le soudain essor de la promotion local, le défi du syndicalisme sous la forme de la Fédération Américaine de Professeurs - AFT -, son propre processus de déségrégation racial aussi que la participation à la création du Ministère de l'Éducation des États-Unis. Récemment, elle a été attaquée par une politique de droite, qui l'attribuait une position de soutenant d'un système d'éducation publique intellectuellement précaire.

Mots-clé: administrateurs écoliers, professeurs, syndicalistes, déségrégation, association professionnel, progressisme administratif.

### Setting the public school agenda: 1857-1920

**F**ounded in 1857, the National Education Association - NEA - functioned through the end of the nineteenth century mainly as a forum for the school promotion plans of the leaders of America's developing public school movement. NEA was, in the main, a rhetorical outlet for these leaders and their plans until the early twentieth century (Wesley, 1957). In pursuing this function, the NEA was a place where many of the issues of significance in education in the nineteenth century were discussed and debated, if not decided. These issues included the purposes of public education, the organizational forms it would take, the curriculum, the administration of schools and school systems, and some matters of pedagogy. A most famous document produced by the NEA was its Committee of Ten report, in 1895, which advocated an increase in the subjects to be taught in the high school curriculum, but continued to stress the notion of a broadened program of academic studies as the core of the high school curriculum (Krug, 1964). This report protected the academic emphasis of the high school and delayed the diversification of the high school curriculum toward a vocational and social adjustment emphasis for two decades. NEA in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then, was a place for the leaders in the American educational enterprise, in elementary, secondary, and higher education, to meet and discuss their concerns (Mattingly, 1975). Noted educators such as William Torrey Harris, Francis Parker, Charles W. Eliot, and many others, spoke at the NEA meetings.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, school enrollment increased substantially and schools and school systems struggled to find ways to handle the new numbers of students. Simultaneously, states were in the process of passing compulsory school attendance laws, motivated both by fear of being overrun by jobless youth and concern for their productive development, that abetted the enrollment pressures on schools and school systems (Urban and Wagoner, 2008). Accompanying these enrollment changes were calls to enhance school efficiency through reorganization of school systems into increasingly centralized bodies, especially in the nation's large cities (Tyack, 1974). The idea was that an efficient school and school system could handle the enrollment increases with a minimum of expense increase and with results that augured well for students and for society.

Most of the teachers who worked in the burgeoning elementary schools of the early twentieth century were women. Organizational change in public schools usually meant an increase in power and responsibility for school administrators, who were mainly men, except for elementary principals where women maintained a significant presence. Women teachers, especially in the nation's cities, pushed back against their administrative superiors, arguing that teacher experience counted as much or more as educational efficiency in improving school policies and effectiveness (Rousmaniere, 1997). The conflict between teachers and administrators also was waged in the NEA, where women had not been allowed to speak at meetings in the nineteenth century. Margaret Haley, leader of the Chicago Teachers' Federation, a group organized initially to pursue sick benefits and pension reform in the city of Chicago, broke this precedent at the 1904 NEA meeting when she delivered an address entitled *Why teachers should organize* (Rousmaniere, 2005). Ella Flagg Young, a

superintendent of the Chicago schools and a sometime associate of Haley, represented the cause of women in school administration within the NEA, and in the larger society. Young, who had studied with John Dewey at the University of Chicago, became a protégé of Dewey and a leader in the battle for more prominent and predictive roles for women in the American educational enterprise and educational practices and policies more oriented to the development of children. She was elected as the first woman president of NEA in 1916 (Semel and Sadovnik, 2002; Blount, 1998).

Haley and other teacher activists pushed hard for a voice for women teachers in the NEA in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This push was answered by an internal reorganization after World War I in which NEA moved its headquarters to Washington, adopted an annual Representative Assembly as its legislative body, with members chosen by election from state and local affiliates of NEA, and determined to become a force for education in national affairs (Urban, 2000). In pursuit of this objective, the NEA began to lobby Congress and the President for the creation of an independent federal educational agency, a Department of Education, to replace the existing body which was housed within a larger federal department. In spite of almost continual lobbying, the NEA failed to achieve this objective for fifty years. Nevertheless, NEA became recognized as a leading organization representing the American educational enterprise, especially its elementary and secondary schools, and made federal relations a most important of its operations.

### **Supporting public education in good times and bad times: 1920-1972**

The place of women in NEA was not an important concern in its early twentieth century reorganization; however, women were recognized symbolically if not substantively in various ways after reorganization, including the alternation of the presidency of the association, by tradition, between a man and a woman each year. Another place within the NEA that women teachers considered their own was the Department of Classroom Teachers, a sub-unit within the larger NEA that discussed the concerns of teachers and gave space within the larger organization for women teachers to be recognized and to pursue some of their agenda of occupational and school improvement. Departmentalization allowed the NEA to recognize a variety of occupational interest and concerns within its larger structure, including school administration, various subject matter specialties, and any other group with a set of common concerns and a membership large enough to be granted its own place within the larger structure. Further, the NEA developed a remarkable publishing program, led by the *NEA Journal* which appeared monthly and spoke to the concerns of the various NEA constituencies, and which was supplemented by various other publications representing NEA departments, committees, and commissions.

Pedagogically, the NEA adopted a progressive, child centered, and social service ideology, which characterized the views of many professional educators in the twentieth century. It termed its primary organizational goal, and the outcomes of this emphasis, to be the professionalization of the teaching force (Cremin, 1957). Its signature pedagogical publication was the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, a committee report published

in 1918. In that document, NEA abandoned the academic focus of the Committee of Ten report of 1895 in favor of a social service rationale and set of programs that valued personal, social, and occupational development of students over academic orientations (Krug, 1964). It would be fair to say that the NEA version of educational progressivism was more social service and efficiency oriented than it was child centered, though the child was certainly a focus of many of its pronouncements and activities. Yet it was social efficiency, which represented both business efficiency in school administration, and schools serving their communities through stressing social service and orientation on the part of their students, that carried the day in the NEA. The NEA version of social efficiency was the same ideology that dominated, along with business efficiency (Callahan, 1962), most large school systems. It subordinated academic studies and individual student development to making the schools vehicles for producing students who would fit productively into a developing and increasingly industrializing society.

Internally, the NEA developed an organizational bureaucracy that grew in size and complexity through the early and middle twentieth century. For example, NEA developed a Research Division that studied and published a wide variety of books and pamphlets on various aspects of the American educational enterprise. The Research Division served as a quasi-academic arm of NEA, publishing reports and documents that polished the organization's image as a professional group (Urban, 1997). It also supported other NEA bodies--departments, committees, and commissions--in their publication efforts. The NEA central office staff grew, slowly but rather continuously, through the 1920s. After being threatened with cutbacks during the Great depression of the 1930s, the NEA bureaucracy continued to develop in both size and strength for the next two decades.

As NEA navigated treacherous economic times, such as the depression of the 1930s, NEA Research studied and published on issues such as school tax policies and other aspects of educational finance. Other topics of concern to NEA in the midst of the depression included teacher tenure and other employment and retention policies, as economically strapped school systems sought ways to limit, even to reduce, teacher pay and benefits in the midst of the depression. In fact, the NEA established a Joint Commission (with its Department of [School] Superintendence) on the Emergency in Education, which published more than ten studies devoted to various aspects of the fiscal crisis facing public schools between 1933 and 1935. Several of those volumes dealt with taxation and discussed the equity and inequities of various taxes for public schools, including the property tax and the corporate and individual income tax (Urban, 2000). Economically, these volumes called for progressive, equity oriented taxation policies that supported public education through the creation of more steady, and growing, streams of revenue.

Also, the Great Depression sparked the founding of an Educational Policies Commission - EPC - by the NEA and its Department of Superintendence. The EPC membership, usually around 20, consisted of a select group of school administrators, state education association leaders, an occasional teacher, professors of education, and one or two university presidents. It met twice a year and debated various educational policy issues and proposals that marked

the group as a long term planning body for NEA and for American public schools. In the 1930s, the EPC dealt with school finance and educational recovery from depression economic conditions. In the 1940s, it dealt with steps needed to be taken in the public schools to aid the national effort in World War II. Rather quickly in the early 1940s, it turned its attention to post-war educational planning and what the public schools would need to look like to help the nation adjust to post-war conditions (Urban, 2005). Like the rest of the NEA affiliated bodies, the EPC had a strong NEA staff leader, initially William G. Carr, who left the EPC only to become the chief staff officer of NEA in the middle of the twentieth century.

In the mid-1940s, NEA turned its attention to local education associations, affiliates of the national organization that existed in cities and other local school districts. NEA stressed cooperation in this series, at the same time that local educators often faced conditions in teacher employment that fostered contention between teachers, school administrators, local and state politicians, and the public. In the immediate post-war years, NEA faced a situation where teachers began to consider and implement strikes and other job actions which were not approved by their association as a response to their occupational crises, but which they deemed necessary because of those crises (Urban, 2005). The late 1940s were punctuated by a series of teachers' strikes in places such as Norwalk, Connecticut and Buffalo, New York, both of which had NEA affiliates that remained on the sidelines as the teachers took militant action.

As the post-war climate was succeeded by a Cold War with the Soviet Union, the NEA continued to support the national political efforts to win the Cold War, and paid insufficient attention to post-World War II demographic changes that were presenting still greater enrollment challenges to the public schools. The NEA celebrated its one hundredth anniversary in 1957 with a centennial history volume and with a wide variety of meetings and conferences, all stressing the accomplishments of professional educators acting within the NEA umbrella (Wesley, 1957). This celebration occurred in a climate within which the organization was oblivious to challenges to public schools and teachers that were just beginning to arise. NEA would prove to be slow and clumsy in reacting to crises which would shake the public schools throughout the nation in the late 1950s and 1960s.

### **Teacher militancy and racial justice**

The teacher unrest in the 1940s had been met with little constructive response from the NEA, or any other group, and the issues which sparked it, poor salaries for teachers and poor financial support for public schools continued to fester. The situation worsened in the 1950s for teachers, especially in the nation's largest cities, where demographic changes and school boards unresponsive to those changes combined to contribute to enormous teacher stress. Starting in the late 1950s, another outburst of teacher strikes began to plague public schools, especially urban public schools. This time a rival organization to the NEA, the American Federation of Teachers - AFT -, took advantage of the situation. The AFT had been founded in 1916 as a loose association of local teachers associations. It did not develop organizationally into a formidable rival to the NEA, as it was hampered by charges of

communism or socialism in the 1920s and 1930s, and even experienced its own internal battle over communism in the latter decade (Urban, 1982). The AFT survived that battle but limped along through the war and immediate post-war years. When teacher grievances reached a peak in the late 1950s, however, the AFT, first acting through its local affiliates in New York City and other large urban centers, moved vigorously to support teachers. Several strikes occurred in New York City in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the AFT developed a collective bargaining agenda that sought to institutionalize teacher power through formally negotiated agreements with school boards, again primarily in large cities.

The NEA reacted slowly and haltingly to teacher strikes and the AFT push for collective bargaining to address the causes of those strikes. NEA attempts to invigorate its own local associations in the 1940s had proved unsuccessful and the group found itself stronger nationally and in states, but not in the local arenas where strikes and collective bargaining for teachers were taking center stage. To address the situation, the NEA began its own urban initiative and developed its own approach to collective bargaining, euphemistically called professional negotiations. The NEA structure hampered its attempts to provide meaningful representation for teachers, however, as it was an association within which its ideology of professionalization meant teachers worked in tandem with, actually under the direction of, their administrative superiors, even when those superiors sought to ignore, or to tame, teacher unrest.

The top management of the NEA represented school administration much more than it did teachers, and the combination of an unresponsive top leadership and a structure which supported administrator domination hamstrung NEA efforts to respond effectively to teacher grievances. The NEA experienced its own permutation of teacher activism, centered in a burgeoning urban caucus, which slowly began to turn the association. Replacement of the retiring NEA chief executive officer, conservative and uninterested in teacher activism, by a younger, more verbal, but fundamentally like-minded associate in the 1960s, exacerbated the crisis plaguing the NEA. In 1968, the NEA's affiliate in the state of Florida engineered a walkout of 35,000 teachers from their classrooms, an action which lasted several months and which ended in the return of teachers without any tangible improvement in their occupational lives. Finally, the urban activists and other teacher oriented groups and individuals succeeded in remaking the association through a constitutional revision in the early 1970s. After a decade and a half of enormous internal turmoil, the NEA emerged in the 1970s as a teachers union that rivaled the AFT in its commitment to the financial and occupational interests of teacher (Urban, 1993).

### **Enhancing the federal government's role in education**

At the same time that the NEA was confronting, or rather failing to confront, teacher militancy, it found itself mired in a process of the racial desegregation of several of its state affiliates. Like schools in most southern and near southern states, NEA affiliates in those states were segregated by race. The decision to declare school segregation illegal in the 1954 *Brown v board of education* decision had repercussions for the segregated state



associations affiliated with NEA. AFT, which had few members in the South, quickly moved to prohibit segregated affiliates and expelled those affiliates which refused to desegregate shortly after the *Brown* decision was rendered. NEA faced a very different situation. Its affiliates were segregated in nearly twenty states and it began a process of trying to get those affiliates to desegregate, statewide and locally, and form one, desegregated, state teachers association. The process of desegregation, begun shortly after *Brown*, did not culminate until more than twenty years later. Only in 1978 did the last NEA affiliate in the state of Louisiana agree to desegregate and become a single state education association. While the merger process was tedious, complex, and combative in many states, the ultimate result was an NEA in which race became a much less controversial issue than it was for the AFT, where large urban affiliates featured significant numbers of white teachers working in schools that were increasingly dominated by African Americans and other minority groups (Urban, 2000).

At the same time that it was pushing for desegregation in its southern affiliates, the NEA restructured itself drastically, pruning several departments from its ranks, especially those that represented school administrators. It became a much more effective competitor with the AFT in organizational contests to represent teachers collectively, especially in small cities. Given its strong state presence, NEA also continued and increased its relatively effective lobby effort in many states, advocating collective bargaining and extending and preserving teacher benefits. Internally, the NEA continued its rhetorical emphasis on an educational profession, but moved to support the various sub units that were engaged in initiating and supporting collective negotiations for teachers. The focus of NEA headquarters activity increasingly became support of teacher collective bargaining, through representation elections and the negotiation and administration of formal contracts that followed those elections.

In tandem with this locally oriented push for collective bargaining, the NEA continued its pursuit of federal financial aid for public education and federal involvement in educational policy, which had begun with its move to Washington, DC in the early 1920s. While aid specifically targeted for a special purpose or policy, called categorical federal aid for things like vocational education, was passed by Congress beginning in the early 1900s and again in the 1930s and 1940s, NEA pursued non-targeted, or general, federal aid, that is money that went to state and local school systems without a specified purpose so that they could allocate it to whatever program or policy that was in greatest need. Landmark federal aid to education measures were passed by Congress in the mid-twentieth century such as the National Defense Education Act in 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. While neither of these measures was true general federal aid, they both increased the categories under which aid was distributed and the amount of money available to public schools. NEA did not take maximum advantage of these two developments, however, preferring to note their continuation of the NEA opposed policy of targeted aid rather than the massive increase in funds that the laws had implemented. Thus, NEA chose not to take credit for federal aid to education at a time when they legitimately could have declared a victory for their long term federal aid agenda (Urban, 2010).

In addition to federal aid, NEA sought cabinet status for the federal education agency. This objective was partially reached with the Cabinet reorganization by President Eisenhower early in his first term when the Office of Education went to the new super-Department of Health, Education and Welfare. It was fully realized in 1979 when Jimmy Carter sparked creation of the Department of Education, thereby granting full Cabinet status to the educational enterprise and fulfilling a commitment he made to NEA, in return for its full political support in the 1976 presidential election (Michael, 2008). While Carter refused NEA recommendations to appoint a noted educator as his first Secretary of Education, choosing instead to appoint an obscure federal judge from California, the NEA this time swallowed its pride and hailed the creation of the new Department as an instance of its effectiveness in representing education, particularly the public schools, on the national stage.

### **Reorganization and its consequences**

The fundamental program of the NEA changed slowly after the early 1970s reorganization that augured more drastic reorientation. Traditionally a staff-oriented association, rather than one in which power resided in its elected officers, the NEA maintained that staff oriented approach in its initial reorganization. The first chief staff officer after reorganization, however, had much more of a commitment to teacher representation and support of local and state associations in that effort than did any of his predecessors. This new staff leadership also responded more nimbly to internal organizational concerns than to external challenges from AFT.

In the 1980s, however, a series of changes in the NEA brought increasingly strong and active presidents to the fore of the association, initially rivaling the chief staff officer as the leader of the association, and, eventually, surpassing that individual in power and in influence. Thus, in terms of organizational makeup the NEA came to resemble its rival, the AFT, in that its elected president served increasingly longer terms in office and became the public face of the organization. Where AFT had its long term president Albert Shanker as its obvious and recognized leader, NEA developed presidents such as Keith Geiger and in the late 1980s and 1990s, who served multiple terms in office and became an effective spokesman for the association to media and other public outlets. This alteration toward presidential leadership led NEA to be represented publicly by a succession of elected leaders who could speak to the teacher membership and citizens and politicians more directly and effectively, and could rival AFT and its more direct teacher orientation more effectively (Urban, 2000).

NEA, as already noted, also was a microcosm of the racial forces and a target of racial reformers at the same time that the public schools were undergoing the trauma of desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s. NEA, however, unlike the public schools, emerged as one of the most integrated entities in the nation, a result unhappily not matched within the public schools themselves. Visible minority leadership emerged in NEA, through the presidencies of Elizabeth Koontz, Mary Hatwood Futtrell, and Reg Weaver, all African

Americans and articulate spokespersons of the cause of teachers, both black and white. Futtrell, especially, was able to interpret the causes and concerns of NEA to the larger American public in ways that made her a formidable organizational rival to the AFT.

Thus beginning with its 1972 reorganization, NEA became another teacher organization which advocated collective bargaining for teachers like the American Federation of Teachers. It waged and won bargaining representation elections, but more often in small and medium sized cities than in the large cities that were still dominated by AFT. As these political battles were being fought for the votes of teachers to become their representative, bitterness between NEA and AFT increased. In the late twentieth century, however, NEA and AFT moved from a position of bitter rivals in campaigns to represent teachers collectively to allies in the larger fight to buttress the position of public schools in the United States, in an era where they endured a variety of attacks from the political and religious right. While the alliance has not yet been fully realized through a merger of the two groups, they cooperate now on a wide variety of issues and are fully aware of each other's platforms and priorities. Merger, which has been talked about for decades, is still elusive for the organizations. Their cooperation with each other, however, allows them to experience some of the benefits of a unified effort on behalf of American teachers without navigating the thorns of a complex organization of two separate and both similar and dissimilar entities.

The unionization of the NEA was never fully completed, since many states, particularly those in the South and the West, never got their legislatures to adopted collective bargaining legislation for teachers. This left sometimes strong NEA affiliates in some of those non-collective bargaining states which used the traditional activities of lobbying the state or local legislature for teacher benefits and school improvements tied to those benefits in place of collective bargaining. The contemporary NEA proudly wears the label of teachers' union at the same time that in many states where collective bargaining is illegal, it is a leader in the movement to represent an occupation without a formal process by which to conduct that representation. That is, the NEA affiliate lobbies in the state legislature for teachers' salaries, benefits, and working conditions. An ominous development for both NEA and AFT has been the successful emergence of avowedly anti-union teacher groups in several southern and western states, to the point that in some states, like Georgia, the anti-union group has surpassed the NEA affiliate in numbers and influence in the state legislature and other political bodies.

The roster of NEA leadership throughout its history reads like a who's who of American education. Nineteenth NEA notables were the same people who were leading the movement for American public schooling. Luminaries such as William T. Harris and Charles W. Eliot led both the NEA and movements for school reform such as Eliot's Committee of Ten on Secondary Education. Twentieth century NEA leaders were less luminous than Harris and Eliot, but more in line with the professionalization process and agenda that was taking place within the American educational enterprise. They tended to gain office through holding leadership positions in the administrations of the public schools and, less so, in the nation's colleges and universities. Holders of these positions, however, were lesser known publicly

than were their nineteenth century counterparts, as education became one competitor for public attention and support, rather than a cause to be advocated zealously for quasi-moral and patriotic purposes. NEA considered itself to be the instigator and the leader of the constant school reform movement by which public schools became larger and more important to the American educational enterprise.

### **Becoming a political target**

As the twentieth century developed, however, NEA and the public schools often became the target of reformers and their efforts. These anti-NEA reformers included pedagogical progressives in the early and middle decades of the century, romantic critics and militant teachers in the 1960s, and market-oriented advocates of charter schools and vouchers to help students pay tuition at private schools later in the century. When NEA moved toward being a teachers union after 1972, it, along with the AFT, began to be severely criticized as the major obstacle to reform by voucher advocates and other market-oriented educational reformers, whose major target was actually the public schools themselves.

A distinctly different group of critics was made up of academic standards-oriented reformers who saw the NEA as a teacher group which was a major obstacle to the reinstallation of educational standards and intellectual values in the nation's schools. The cause of maintaining academic standards in a climate in which education paid attention to non-academic concerns had been a constant but minor theme through much of the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, noted academics such as historians Richard Hofstadter and Arthur Bestor characterized the public schools as anti-intellectual places where child centeredness and other forms of educational progressivism had dislodged the academic disciplines and their intellectual values and concerns from their rightful primacy of place (Bestor, 1953; Hofstadter, 1963).

These exposes were not directed particularly at the NEA, but rather at an educational establishment in which NEA played a prominent part, along with school administrators and professors of education from the nation's teacher training departments, schools, and colleges of education. In fact, the term educational establishment was brought to prominence in retired Harvard University President James Bryant Conant's critique of teacher education, published in 1963 (Conant, 1963). Conant, who had been a prominent member of the NEA sponsored Educational Policies Commission on four different occasions from the 1930s through the 1950s, was fully aware that his indictment of teacher education would estrange him from the ranks of professional educators in the NEA and in the nation's teacher preparatory institutions. His critical use of the term educational establishment as a way to label the leaders of the American educational enterprise as opponents of educational excellence in the training of teachers as well as in the conduct and content of the public schools, meant that he was no longer interested in these educators as his friends and close colleagues (Conant, 1970).

The cause of standards-oriented academic reform received a prominent boost through the publication of a pamphlet by a committee appointed by President Ronald Reagan, *A nation at risk*, published in 1983. While Reagan's own educational agenda was avowedly anti-public school, pursuing policies such as the demise of the recently created United States Department of Education, vouchers for public school students to attend private schools, tax relief for parents who paid private school tuition for their children, and prayer and other religious activities in public schools, his Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell, was a public school and university administrator who sought to mitigate Reagan's more overt anti-public school agenda. He accomplished this through *A Nation at Risk*, which argued that public education and American education at large were largely failing in the effort to educate American citizens, especially when compared through international educational achievement tests, to other nations (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Bell managed to get Reagan to appear at the news conference announcing the publication of *A Nation at Risk* that simultaneously defused the more overtly anti-public school agenda of the president and initiated a huge wave of criticism of public education as a fundamentally anti-intellectual and anti-academic enterprise. Bell continued to lead the criticism of public schools as institutions that were eroding the intellectual capital of the United States through their failure to seek and reward academic achievement (Bell, 1988).

The NEA and the AFT, as the two most prominent representative organizations for American teachers, were prominently in the line of critical fire launched by *A Nation at Risk*. NEA, which had loyally supported Jimmy Carter in his losing bid for reelection to the presidency in 1980, had little leverage over or influence on Reagan and his administration. In fact, the administration pummeled the NEA as a flat-footed protector of teachers and school administrators who were unconcerned with the decline in educational standards in American public schools. The situation for the AFT was less dire. While it had not supported Reagan in 1980, its support for Carter was lukewarm at best. Prior to Carter's selection as the Democratic nominee in 1980, a selection normally considered to be automatic for an incumbent president, AFT had backed a push for the nomination of Senator Edward Kennedy as the Democratic nominee. When this move did not come to fruition, AFT supported Carter, but with little of the organizational enthusiasm and commitment generated by the NEA. Further, through the astute use of public media, AFT developed a stance under the leadership of its president Albert Shanker, which favored academically-oriented standards in public schools. This allowed AFT to polish its public image as a less obstructionist body to the cause of standards-oriented academic reform than NEA.

The search by the NEA and the AFT for a productive position on issues such as standards-based school reform in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is worthy of extended attention. Beginning shortly after publication in 1983 of the famous pamphlet decrying a decline in the standards of American schools, *A nation at risk*, NEA's rather flat footed opposition stood in contrast to the AFT's more nuanced position that academic excellence deserved the attention of teachers and their organizations. Both organizations faced severe criticism from the political right for their indifference to standards, but also

received criticism from minority activists in the nation's urban schools, who saw the failure of their young people in those schools as due, in substantial part, to the obstinacy of teachers and their organizations in the face of calls to embrace reform. The combination of criticism from the right, the expected direction, and from minority interests, an unexpected but powerful indictment, put NEA and AFT on the defensive in the battle over school improvement through raising academic standards.

### **A new teacher unionism**

Starting slowly in the late 1980s, however, NEA began to embrace a variety of reform initiatives and thrusts to combat its image as an obstacle to standards-based, and other reforms of the public schools. Under presidents Mary Futrell, Keith Geiger, and Bob Chase especially, acting as Albert Shanker had done for the AFT, NEA worked hard to portray itself as a friend of school reform, not an opponent. In the mid-1990s, Chase discussed in a variety of forums the parameters of a new unionism that he embraced for teachers, devoted to making teachers and their organizations the advocates of school change and not flat-footed opponents of change. Critics had used this negative image of NEA to bash both the organization and its members (Raney, 1998). For Chase, and others in the NEA before, during, and after his presidency, a new unionism involved an NEA focused in many of its programs and actions on school achievement and school improvement, in a wide variety of academic areas. Stressing the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students was a way to weld this concern to the substantial minority presence in the NEA and the advocacy of minority youth success in the public schools. Concern with teaching and learning thus became a highly visible part of the new unionism and the segments of the NEA that embraced it.

The emphasis on school improvement also came to prominence in local affiliates of both the NEA and the AFT in the 1990s. The Teachers Union Reform Movement - Turn - was created by a coalition of local teacher groups affiliated with NEA and with AFT. Turn locals were successful in negotiating some educational improvements in their agreements with school boards, especially in Rochester, New York and Cincinnati, Ohio. These improvement included teacher evaluation systems that involved rigorous attention to teacher efforts in the classroom, often conducted by fellow teachers, in place of the rituals of occasional visits to the classrooms by administrators. The Turn agenda was clearly evident in its statement of purpose:

Teacher unions must provide leadership for the collective voice of their members. Teacher unions have a responsibility to students, their families, and to the broader society. Teacher unions are committed to public education as a vital element of our democracy. What unites these responsibilities is our commitment to help all children learn. We affirm the union's responsibility to collaborate with other stakeholders in public education and to seek consistently higher levels of student achievement. (<http://www.turnexchange.net/national-turn.html>)

Turn continues to be a place where reform-oriented teacher unionists can meet with each other and discuss ways to try and implement a genuine educational improvement agenda in their contracts. While Turn has not caught the attention of a majority of local teacher organizations, its very existence has allowed both NEA and AFT to deflect some of the criticism of their organizations as solely protectionist bodies directed their way. Further, cooperation between NEA and AFT affiliates in Turn has contributed to the increasingly cooperative climate between the two national teacher unions. As mentioned earlier, merger has failed to materialize, but the groups have agreed to cooperate whenever and wherever possible and to avoid debilitating competition with each other for members and their allegiance. This agreement has left NEA in its position as the largest organization of teachers in the United States, with membership well over three million, and AFT with a smaller membership, but one concentrated in large urban centers cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC that allows it to wield political clout far in excess of the size of its membership base.

Somewhat ironically, concern with teaching and learning and other aspects of academic achievement had been a long-time priority of the pre-union NEA of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. Subject matter groups in areas such as mathematics - NCTM -, social studies - NCSS -, and science - NSTA - all originated as departments of NEA in the twentieth century and pursued the intellectual interests of teachers and the achievement of students in their respective subjects as assiduously as the parent organization tried to pursue other occupational interests. The American Educational Research Association - AERA - also began as a department of NEA, and has evolved into a large and powerful representative of the importance of educational research in the advocacy of school reforms of various kinds. Other contemporary educational bodies such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education - NCATE - and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education - AACTE - also were originated as departments under the large umbrella in the NEA which preceded the teacher union that developed after 1970. These organizations, from their inception, pursued the goal of the professional enhancement of school teachers, through discussion of rigorous academic and clinical standards for preparation programs.

Even after unionization, NEA never dropped completely its focus on teaching and learning. It kept a division devoted to instructional development and tried to focus the effort of that division on school improvement at the same time that it zealously pursued collective bargaining rights and representation for teachers. It continued the work of its Research Division, founded in 1922, providing and publicizing data relating to teachers' salaries and benefits as well as school finance policies at the same time that it undertook to use that data directly in its organizing activities. In fact, one longstanding study of the NEA Research Division, on the status of the American public school teacher, exhibited the association's five decade long effort to identify the issues and trends involved in the employment and improvement of school teachers in the elementary and secondary schools, including their academic training. Beginning in 1956, NEA produced a publication every five years entitled *The Status of the American Public School Teacher*. As the federal department of education

increased its responsibilities, including demographic and other studies of the teaching profession, NEA was faced with a decline in the need for its own work on the topic. A summary and interpretation of this work appeared in book form in 2011 (Drury and Baer, 2011).

In terms of school reform, one of the most important activities of the NEA is also among the least well known. The NEA created the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education - NFIE - in the early 1970s, at the same time that the association unionized. This change allowed NEA to continue its long-standing pursuit of teaching and learning reform at the same time that it underwent severe internal restructuring. The NFIE, after a decade or so of relative inactivity, became a major player in the world of educational reform in the middle 1980s, fueled by a commitment of one dollar per year per NEA member. This commitment was undertaken by a vote of the NEA Representative Assembly in response to a challenge from then NEA president Mary Hatwood Futtrell.

This financial commitment was continued subsequently by the NEA, and made permanent by action of the Representative Assembly in 2002. With this financial base, NFIE undertook an expansion of internal grants to teachers who proposed various programs to improve their instruction or alter their curriculum to make it more attractive to students. Shortly after 2000, the NFIE undertook a Closing the Gap initiative through which it sought to address the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more affluent peers. Closing the Gap now funds major efforts in Milwaukee Wisconsin, Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Seattle Washington, as well as other initiative in southeast Ohio and Connecticut. All the NFIE grant programs, only a few of which have been mentioned here, were undertaken to bring NEA and its members into the forefront of the movement for reform of the nation's classrooms. Undergoing a name change in the twenty-first century, the now titled NEA Foundation continues to pursue the cause of school improvement through the financing of innovative pedagogical proposals from classroom teachers. While the work has been underpublicized, it clearly shows an association interested in school improvement as well as the welfare of its members. It attempts to link these two goals by rewarding initiatives from teachers devoted to school improvement and student achievement, values that have long characterized many, if not most, members of the teaching profession.

### **Concluding remarks**

A final assessment of NEA would have to acknowledge several things. First, the long history of the association as an advocate of public education should be noted, even as it evolved internally in various organizational alterations that spoke to the changing concerns of the teachers who overwhelmingly made up its membership. Gender relations, school finance, teacher-administrator interactions, and student achievement, overall and especially by minority students, have vied for primacy of place in the NEA and its forums. The success of the NEA in its longstanding campaign to increase the role of the federal government in education was a landmark accomplishment. Also, the tortured but ultimately successful desegregation of the NEA stands as a powerful accomplishment, particularly in an era when



racial and ethnic minority students are becoming more prominent numerically, and likely dominant in the future, in American public schools. Finally, the achievement by the NEA of a cooperative relationship with the American Federation of Teachers should be noted, and applauded. Politically, the stakes for American teachers and their organizations are too important to have those organizations turned away from genuinely educational and occupational issues in favor of organizational rivalry.

Two or three decades of conservative criticism of the federal role in education and the conservative advocacy of racial and ethnic majority concerns over the improvement of minority educational achievement have failed to dislodge these priorities, either in the NEA agenda or in the larger political agenda for American public school. Yet the onslaught of criticism of teacher unions has now been accompanied by the mainstreaming of a formerly minor theme in conservative political thought. Public schools are now the subject of criticism from the political right, aided and abetted by the neo-liberal members of the political left. The advocacy of various market-oriented policies and programs such as charter schools, voucher systems, different sorts of tuition tax credits or other schemes to shelter private school parents from paying for public schools have all entered the political arena with a vengeance in the last several decades. And the sensationalist indictment of public schools sparked by the strict, but enormously naïve, requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act - NCLB - of 2003, passed by cooperation between the conservative George W. Bush administration and the much less conservative Congress deserve special attention (DeBray, 2006).

Demanding strict accountability from public schools, through increased student achievement as measured by standardized tests that pay little if any attention to student socioeconomic background measures, is a characteristic of both NCLB and many of the state educational reform movements, led by both conservative and less conservative governors and legislatures. The prominence of these educational reform agendas in the South and the West, regions where states have lagged substantially behind the rest of the nation in financial support for public schools, augurs poorly for public school success in spite of the “reforms.” In fact, many of the reform policies look more like moves to disestablish, or severely weaken, public schools by robbing them of their best students academically and leaving them with students who are less easily educated than their peers.

All of these policies are becoming increasingly prominent in the politics of American education, at the same time that the obvious failure of requirements like the one in NCLB to have all students performing at grade level in 2014 is now imminent. One can only hope that NEA, AFT, and other groups devoted to public schools will be able to stem the tide of unjust criticism, respond effectively to the school improvement advocates who are raising legitimate concerns, and protect the public schools of the United States of America from an increasingly powerful group of politicians, and their financial and ideological supporters, who are devoted to the destruction of American public education.

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