



NEA: A Force for Change

One of the most historic moments in America's history was four years ago when a crowd of nearly a quarter-million packed Grant Park in Chicago, and President Obama addressed the nation for the first time as its president-elect. He shattered more than 200 years of history by winning the election as the first African-American president of the United States. Hope and progress were symbols of not only his election, but were signals to the world of America's desire for change.

Since then, in many state legislatures and during the 2012 presidential election cycle, our opponents made every attempt to turn the clock back through systematic attacks on public employee unions, voting rights, and a huge infusion of undisclosed corporate money into our political system. Yet, the winds of change were unrelenting with the re-election of President Obama! NEA proudly supported and organized around President Obama's vision because he believes that we can't rebuild our economy without a well-educated workforce. He shares our view that a quality education is an essential human right and when public education fails, democracy fails with it.

Those electoral winds also inspired a broader momentum with the historic increases in the number of women and Latinos in Congress. NEA and WEAC helped make history in Wisconsin where Tammy Baldwin was sworn in as the first woman elected by the residents of Wisconsin to serve in the U.S. Senate, and she is also the first openly gay member to serve in the United States Senate. The NEA and its affiliates helped pass the DREAM Act ballot measure in Maryland and beat back attempts to curb voting rights in Minnesota. In California, we helped to secure the passage of Proposition 30, a revenue initiative to stop \$6 billion in trigger cuts to schools. We also defeated the corporate-driven attempts in Idaho, Indiana, and South Dakota to crowd out the voices of educators in promoting effective change in our public schools.

Powerful demographics are changing our politics and our nation. Census projections show that by 2042, the majority of the American population will consist of people identified as non-white. This shift has already begun to impact our communities and our classrooms, and we must ensure we are on the cutting edge of providing the highest quality instruction, education services, and supports to all students. Over the next decade our union will experience its own generational shift as baby boomers enter retirement and a new generation of educators will step into America's schools to educate the next generation of public school students. To meet this looming challenge, we must organize and mobilize grass-roots participation in our advocacy efforts for Great Public Schools, but also our efforts to lead our professions.

Our new Center for Organizing is developing methods to connect, mentor, coach and assist locals and members in new and meaningful ways. Whether we are engaging around social justice, human rights, smaller class sizes, worker's rights, professional development, or challenges to collective bargaining, we must help them see the power and value of the union and their local associations as a vehicle to elevate their voice and make meaningful change for the students and families we serve.

Sadly, our service to students has recently and yet again been marked by tragic events. The American public is still reeling after the horrific shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. In an instant, the lives, aspirations and dreams of 20 children were wiped out. Similarly, NEA member Charles Pollard, Jr. also sacrificed his life protecting the students on his bus. These educators who placed themselves in the path of flying bullets to protect our children will be remembered as great educators but also as unlikely heroes. Violence in schools has been too frequent an occurrence for too many years in way too many schools. We cannot tolerate an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in our public schools. Educators must continue to take the lead to address the issues of bullying and violence, demanding the supports that students and educators need, so that our schools remain safe for teaching and learning.

The challenges that we have today and the forces impacting us are so strong that they have indelibly changed the educational system and society at large. Things will never go back to the way they were. Attacks on collective bargaining and the role of the union, the nation's changing demographics, education reform efforts, and an explosion in the use of education technology and online learning have radically changed the role of educators and the system of educating our nation's students.

Despite the road ahead, we must remember that we are more than a traditional labor union. We are social justice warriors and advocates for a better and stronger America. I have often said that our clashes and fights to defend public education around the nation are part of a larger struggle for the country's soul. As we move forward, we must remember this larger struggle and continue to answer the national call to unite as one voice in the cause for public education. That requires us as an organization not only to advocate for equal opportunity and supports for every single student in America, but

it also requires us to more aggressively take responsibility for the quality of education professionals in our public education system. We must be as powerful and relevant in responding to our members' professional practice needs as we are in our advocacy and electoral endeavors.

We must continue to strive for the realization of our vision of a great public school for every student so that no matter the socioeconomic status, family dynamics, or learning disabilities, there is no student unable to succeed and live the American dream.

John Stocks, *executive director*