This is a critical time for public education in our country.

Sixty years ago this spring, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its landmark verdict in the case of Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, KS. That ruling made equal opportunity in education the law of the land, but six decades later, we are still fighting to achieve real equity in education.

Meanwhile, over the past few years, schools have had to do more with fewer resources. Cuts to higher education have been especially steep, and rising tuition has forced students to take on staggering debt. Evaluation systems are unfair to educators and don’t help students. And as many teachers near retirement, our current system isn’t recruiting and training enough new educators who are prepared to take their place.

Those of us who have devoted our lives to education are accustomed to these kinds of challenges. These days, however, the stakes seem higher than ever, because some people are trying to take advantage of the difficult climate by waging an all-out assault on public education.

We can no longer take our nation’s commitment to public education for granted, because the threat of a corporate takeover of our schools is real. There are those who put profits before students, and we must stop them. If we want to protect and strengthen our public schools, we must be diligent in our efforts to ensure that educators have a strong voice.

We must also continue to help our members in their everyday work, because when our members succeed, students succeed.

Through NEA’s Center for Great Public Schools, the NEA Foundation, our Center for Organizing and other initiatives, NEA is working directly with members in hundreds of local affiliates. We are empowering them to make changes at the classroom, school and district level—changes that are coming from the grassroots, not from the
top down. Our members are engaging with parents and other partners in their communities to do what’s best for students.

It’s a lot of work on many different fronts, but it all boils down to one thing: helping students succeed. That has always been our top priority, and in 2014 that goal continues to drive everything we do.

I hope you will find this handbook to be a helpful tool in your work. And on behalf of NEA’s leadership and members, I thank you for all that you do for our nation’s public school students.

Dennis Van Roekel, president