February 8, 2013

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

I cannot begin to tell you how proud I was to represent the more than 3 million members of the National Education Association at your inauguration just a few weeks ago. Your address to the nation was a compelling reflection of a desire that we share to achieve a stronger, more unified, and more just society. The vision you set forth is part of the same, but more intensely articulated challenge you have issued to Americans since you stepped onto the national stage: to collectively move our country forward and to individually challenge ourselves to be better to one another and give of ourselves to our communities.

As you prepare to deliver your State of the Union address to Congress, we look forward to hearing more about how we should confront the many challenges we face as a nation. As you know, NEA members applauded the efforts of you and Vice President Biden to avert another financial crisis last month during the negotiations surrounding the “fiscal cliff.” But we once again find ourselves fighting an all too familiar and frustrating battle that reflects much more than a crisis in our politics, but rather a crisis of opportunity for the vast majority of Americans. It is a crisis that goes well beyond the nation’s fiscal policy, as you reflected in your Inaugural Address.

NEA members, who live and work in almost every community in this great nation, share the optimism, yet lingering concern, of most Americans. Our members still see the impact of the troubled economy as their students continue to come to school hungry, sick or in need of counseling and other services. We try every day to mitigate the isolation and depression that so many students feel due to bullying, cultural and language differences within their schools, difficult family environments, and more. We see parents every day who worry about whether their jobs are secure and how they will afford to send their children—our students—to college. Across the country, we have been grieving the senseless loss of students and fellow educators in tragic school shootings—shootings that force us to relive all those that have occurred since 1997 in Paducah, Kentucky. And, we continue to see within our school districts, cities and towns the continued and appalling disparities in the opportunities afforded to children because of their zip code, race or ethnicity, or their parents’ income. Mr. President, we know that America will truly never live up to its promise until we close these justice and opportunity gaps for every American man, woman, and child.
Your Inaugural Address set a strong tone and laid out a clear agenda – to support and lift up the hopes, dreams, and rights of all Americans. While we have included at the end of this letter some specific policy ideas for your consideration, we hope the State of the Union will chart a course for the nation that is built upon the following principles:

1) Opportunity requires an economy that works for everyone.
2) Opportunity begins in great public schools for every single student.
3) Opportunity requires a democracy that protects every American’s voice and vote.

In order for the economy to truly work for all Americans, we need to continue to pursue fiscal policies that promote fairness and prosperity (such as corporate tax reform that generates revenue), create jobs, make college affordable, and lift children out of poverty. It is entirely unacceptable that one of every five children we see in our classrooms lives in poverty. We also believe that achieving comprehensive immigration reform so that 11 million aspiring Americans have a path to citizenship, talented young people can pursue their dreams by going to college, and families remain intact will not only help our economy, but will create a stronger, more perfect union.

Second, we have always believed that the gateway to opportunity for individuals and the cradle of innovation and ingenuity for our country begins in our public schools. We hope that you will pursue an aggressive agenda to remedy the extreme and pronounced inequities of opportunity that our public education system continues to perpetuate. While our education system is primarily a state and local responsibility, the duty of the federal government to ensure equal access and equitable opportunities for every single child in America has never been fully exercised. To that end, we will do our part by transforming our union to take more responsibility for the quality and the practice of educators. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in the coming months to share our plan to effectuate this obligation that we have to America’s students, our profession, and our country. Great public schools, however, do not begin and end with public school employees alone. They also require equal access to a full range of services, programs, and learning conditions that meet each child’s unique needs; involved parents and communities that are welcomed and supported; high standards that promote 21st century skills rather than rote memorization; safe, secure, supportive school environments (including common-sense gun violence prevention measures); and equal access to high quality early childhood education.

Finally, the crisis of opportunity for Americans to participate in our democracy was on full display during the last election cycle. Reactionary state laws, unequal and unethical administration of voting procedures, and the unfettered access of corporations to influence electoral outcomes has severely damaged our democracy. We must correct this threat to our democracy by ensuring: 1) universal voter registration (as promoted by the Brennan Center); 2) equitable administration by states of voting procedures and access to the polls; and 3) that we curb the influence of money in politics that has resulted from the infamous Citizens United decision. We wholeheartedly agree that wide variances within and across states regarding voting rights fundamentally violate the premise of the American democracy. When our members teach history and civics, we want to be able to confidently impart to students across this country that no matter one’s race, income, or neighborhood, each American voice and vote is equally valued and protected. The federal government must do more to ensure that reality.
As I listened to your Inaugural Address, you called on all citizens to fulfill their obligation “to shape the debates of our time -- not only with the votes we cast, but with the voices we lift in defense of our most ancient values and enduring ideals.” The more than 3 million educators of the National Education Association stand ready to answer this call. Again, I hope to have the opportunity to share with you in greater detail our plan to do our part with respect to lifting up educators’ practice for the benefit of students. Until then, I pledge on behalf of our members our support to work with you to make the values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness real for every American.

Sincerely,

Dennis Van Roekel

Dennis Van Roekel
President
Important Policy Priorities for the State of the Union Address and Federal Budget

We would specifically urge the Administration to include a focus on the following priorities to move our country forward:

- **Continued economic recovery, bolstered by increased investments in education and other programs that spur economic growth.** In just one month, the “sequestration” across-the-board cuts delayed under the fiscal cliff deal will go into effect. These cuts will be devastating for millions of students and schools across the country. Our nation’s schools are already being asked to do so much more with so much less. Every day, NEA members tell us about services that have been eliminated, programs that have been cut, and overcrowded classrooms that are bursting at the seams. The children of this country are not to blame for the economic downturn and they should not be made to bear the brunt of fixing it. Rather, we must ask corporations and the wealthiest among us to pay their fair share. And, as you have so clearly stated, we cannot hold America’s fiscal well-being and the obligation to pay our national debt hostage to those who would slash even more from our children, seniors, and the poorest in our nation who are working their way to the middle class.

- **Quality early education.** Early childhood education is essential to preparing young children for success in school. This is particularly true for students in high poverty communities. Research shows that quality early childhood education is a significant predictor of a child's future educational achievement and emotional development. Noted economists agree that investing in early childhood education is fiscally responsible because it yields a tremendous return on investment, ranging from $3 to $17 for every dollar invested. High-quality early education programs help reduce the need for special education services and education remediation, lower juvenile justice rates, improve health outcomes, increase high school graduation and college matriculation rates, and increase self-sufficiency and productivity among families.

- **Affordable higher education.** NEA believes that anyone who is qualified and interested in post-secondary education should have the opportunity, regardless of ability to pay. Congress passed the original GI bill because it recognized that higher education is good for students, good for the economy, and good for society at large. Higher education is the path to prosperity in the 21st century—for individual students and for our nation as a whole. Making college affordable – both to increase initial access and ensure that students can complete their studies – must be an essential part of our nation’s commitment to educational excellence.

- **Support for community colleges.** Community colleges play a critical role in economic recovery and in preparing the skilled workforce necessary for the 21st century. They work directly to meet the needs of employers in their regions, but can also meet evolving workforce needs by being flexible and adaptable. They can train the next generation of our workforce as well as train current workers in new technologies. Community colleges also offer a good, quality affordable option for students whose families may not be able to afford to send them directly to a four-year college.
• **Measures to prevent gun violence and ensure school and campus safety.** From Paducah, Kentucky in 1997, to Newtown just a few months ago, to Alabama most recently, every member of the National Education Association grieves when students and educators are victims of horrific violence. We are a family, so we grieve for the parents who have lost children, and we grieve for the families of the educators who time and time again put themselves between bullets and their students. Now, more than ever, we stand ready to speak out and mobilize to protect our students and communities from further pain and needless violence. NEA supports a multi-pronged approach to gun violence prevention. As you have said, there is “no single piece of legislation that will solve this problem.” We hope you will use the State of the Union to renew your calls for common-sense measures, such as universal background checks and a ban on military-style assault weapons. But, we also hope you will call for the broader range of interventions and services necessary to address this crisis, including a greater emphasis on access to community mental health services, assistance to help schools and college campuses enhance their physical security and prepare to respond to emergencies, and a stronger focus on creating safer and more supportive school climates.

• **Fair and comprehensive immigration reform.** Immigration policy profoundly impacts NEA members and their students. As educators, we have witnessed for far too long the impact that the current immigration system has had on our students, their families, and our communities. We see undocumented, aspiring Americans every day in our classrooms and our schools. Their parents came to the United States seeking the promise of freedom and opportunity in this country. We welcomed your recent announcement of a plan to continue moving comprehensive immigration reform forward. We hope you will devote time in the State of the Union to calling for a realistic path to citizenship for the 11 million aspiring citizens who call America home; preserving the unity of families, traditional and nontraditional; and passing the DREAM Act to provide a path to college and citizenship for talented students who have grown up here and have so much to offer the nation.