

History and Development of the NEA-ATA Relationship

In 1966, Black and white educators demonstrated their concern for the unity and integrity of the education profession by completing a merger of the National Education Association and the American Teachers Association (ATA).

The merger of NEA and ATA paved the way for merger agreements between African-American and white associations in state and local affiliates throughout the South. It also signaled NEA's great leap forward in terms of promoting civil and human rights of educators and children. For decades ATA had sought to eliminate discrimination in education, to eradicate racism in American society, to improve the education of children, and to strengthen the educational systems of communities.

ATA had its roots in the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools, founded in 1904 by J.R.E. Lee of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Under the leadership of its first executive secretary, H. Councill Trenholm, ATA expanded its membership from 3,100 in 1944 to 11,000 in 1947. By 1963, ATA membership had grown to over 75,000 educators—Black and white—and the association had become known as an advocate of equality of educational opportunity for every child and equality of professional status for every teacher.”

Although the NEA governing documents had never placed racial restrictions

on membership, little was done in the early years to encourage Black educators to participate in Association affairs. While Booker T. Washington had addressed the NEA convention in 1884, there were few other signs of cultural pluralism in NEA.

NEA's first positive step toward organizational integration was the creation in 1926 of a committee to investigate the status of Black teachers in the United States. Two years later, the NEA Representative Assembly established the Committee to Cooperate with the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools as a permanent committee with a regular budget appropriation. In 1940, the Joint Committee of NEA and the newly renamed American Teachers Association was established under the leadership of NEA President Donald DuShane and Dr. Trenholm.

Over the years the NEA-ATA Joint Committee did much to improve the status of Black educators in NEA. The committee obtained a ruling from the NEA Executive Committee that Black teachers could be certified as NEA members through the white state association in states where the black state association was not affiliated with NEA. The Joint Committee also succeeded in having the NEA Bylaws reinterpreted to permit the affiliation of so-called second state associations, which made it

possible for representatives of these associations to serve as delegates to the NEA Representative Assembly.

In July 1952, the Joint Committee recommended that the Board of Directors, pursuant to the policy established in the Bylaws by the 1950 Representative Assembly, choose for the 1953 Representative Assembly a city where there would be assured equality in all accommodations. Subsequently, the Board voted that the 1953 Representative Assembly be held in Miami Beach, Florida. Thus, in 1953, NEA became the first large national organization to hold its national convention in the South under nondiscriminatory conditions.

The NEA-ATA Joint Committee worked with the American Textbook Publishers Association and the Southern Textbook Publishers Association to identify textbook writers, editors, and consultants who were without racial bias. Working with the American Child Health Association, the Joint Committee studied the health and health problems of Black children. The Joint Committee sponsored

courses, activities, and publications about race relations and minority group problems.

In testimony to the effectiveness of the NEA-ATA Joint Committee, the 1966 NEA Representative Assembly, meeting in Miami Beach, gave unanimous approval to the merger of NEA and ATA, and ATA delegates approved merger by a vote of 178 to 3. The Human and Civil Rights Awards dinner during the NEA Annual Meeting features past presidents of NEA and ATA as a symbol of the union of the two organizations.

A highlight of the 1991 NEA Representative Assembly in Miami Beach was a commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the merger of NEA and ATA. The celebration featured Association leaders who were involved in the NEA-ATA merger and in the mergers of the dual state affiliates.

The 2016 NEA Representative Assembly in Washington, DC featured the 50th Anniversary celebration of the NEA-ATA merger of 1966.