PUTTING OUR VALUES TO WORK

A Guide for the Association Human and Civil Rights Activist

“Be the change you want to see in the world.” - Gandhi
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NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
The National Education Association is the nation’s largest professional employee organization, representing 3.2 million elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators, and students preparing to become teachers.

Cover: The flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write “The Star-Spangled Banner.” (Smithsonian Museum of American History)
Equal Opportunity
A Just Society
Democracy
Professionalism
Partnership
Collective Action
Great Public Schools Are a Basic Right for Every Child

Adopted by the 2006 NEA Representative Assembly
“There’s always something to do, no matter what your age, as long as you can get up and walk and talk. There’s always hope. We have a saying: ‘La esperanza muere al ultimo.’ Hope dies last. Hope for whatever you want to do. If you can’t do it today, there’s always tomorrow or the next year.”
—Jessie de la Cruz, a 74-year-old farmworker organizer
Often times when people hear or read about a wrong, they say somebody ought to do something about it. But the truth is, when people say that, they often mean: Somebody else ought to do something.

Activists are the ones who step up and do something. They lead by example. What’s more, they invite others to join them. Activists make the world go around.

Take Jack McShane, for example.

Every day, when 13-year-old Jack McShane rode his bike past New Orleans City Park, it bothered him. It just wasn’t right. City Park is one of the great urban parks in America. But after Hurricane Katrina flooded it, the city abandoned it. And weeds and long grass took over.

So one Saturday morning Jack took his Dad’s lawn mower over to City Park and just started mowing. “Well, nobody was doing it, so I had to,” Jack says. And for many weekends thereafter, this skinny 13-year old boy could be seen somewhere on City Park’s 1,300 acres, mowing away.

What’s more, Jack recruited other volunteers, mainly other teenagers, into his grassroots mowing club which he named the “Mow-Rons.” And the Mow-Rons are now an official, non-profit charity and have purchased dozens of mowers. Each week they clear a little more of City Park and bring a little more of New Orleans back to life.

“It’s really great to see people having fun in the park again,” says Jack.

Jack McShane is an activist.

You can be one too. See a problem—take it on!
Sick of all education being reduced to a standardized test score?—do something about it.

Class sizes too big in your school?—make class size reduction your issue, take action.

Worried about the kids who drop out of school and are never heard from again?—speak up, reach out.

Are students who are struggling to learn English falling further and further behind academically?—do something about it, help get them help.

Wonder why more minority students are not taking college prep courses?—ask some hard questions, kick up a fuss.

Is your union trying to bargain decent wages and benefits for you?—stand up and support your union.

Fed up with politicians who talk piously about holding public schools accountable, then fail to deliver the resources needed to improve your school?—hold the politicians accountable, put them on the spot.

Be an activist.

Education is the human and civil rights issue of the 21st Century.

To work for better schools and better pay for educators is to be a human and civil rights activist.

See something that needs changing? Be the person who does something about it. Be an activist.
Frequently Asked Questions About Being An Activist

Q. Why become an activist in the first place? I already work very hard.
A. Because you care deeply about children and young people, and as hard as you work in your classroom or at your work site, it’s never enough to ensure that every child or young person receives the quality education he or she needs to succeed in life.

Q. How do I find the time to be an activist? I am already so busy.
A. If you’re concerned about time, start small. Everyone has time to talk, for a minute or two, one-on-one, with a colleague about an issue of mutual concern—or to e-mail your elected representative about an important piece of legislation affecting children and our profession. Do what you can. “Am I doing all that I can?” is the question to ask.

Q. I don’t feel comfortable speaking in public. Can I still be an activist?
A. You bet. Public speaking isn’t for everyone. But you can write a letter, make a phone call, and speak one-on-one with a friend or neighbor. What’s more, the Internet now provides people who are uncomfortable with the public spotlight with a wonderful opportunity to be cyber activists. Besides, a lot of people who once dreaded public speaking actually get good at it, with a little training and encouragement.

Q. I have read about the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, and seen the documentaries, but as much as I admire the heroes of that era, I just don’t see myself doing the stuff they did. Is that wrong?
A. We revere the memories of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, the Greensboro Four, and the other civil rights warriors of that era. Their stories inspire us to this day. But their heroism can also be intimidating, if we let it. There are many actions you can take right now to make a difference, and, yes, those actions will probably be less dramatic but no less important than the heroic deeds of yesterday’s civil rights warriors. That was then, this is now. We do what we can with what we have.
Q. But haven’t all the great human and civil rights battles already been fought and won?

A. Absolutely not. That’s a common misconception. It’s true racism has changed. It’s been beaten back, and in the process, like a virus, racism has mutated into new forms. It comes out, however, when a well-known radio personality insults the young women who played for the NCAA Women’s Basketball Championship or when a noose is hung from a tree in a school yard. And racism is cropping up frequently in the current debate over immigration. Racism lives.

Q. But isn’t institutionalized racism a thing of the past?

A. No, it is not. Take the chronic underfunding of schools that serve poor and minority children, for example. It’s true that the decision makers who perpetuate this injustice don’t espouse racist views. They don’t say: “These children are less capable of learning, therefore we will invest less in them.” But they still go ahead, year after year, and invest less in some children than others.

Q. Isn’t being an activist really a drag—endless meetings, long hours, and mindless chores?

A. Heck, no. People get involved in their Association to meet people, have fun, learn new skills, pursue an interest, and link their lives to some higher purpose. Activism adds breadth and depth to your life.

Q. But what about the endless meetings, long hours, and mindless chores? You didn’t address them.

A. OK, there are meetings, hours, and chores. But this is shared work, and you will find camaraderie among your fellow activists when the cause you are fighting for really matters.

Q. I am very independent and I am professional. Will I sacrifice my independence or my professionalism by getting involved in collective action?

A. No. Individuals are strengthened by working together for the common good, not by giving up their individuality. And as education professionals, we advance both our professional status and the quality of public education when we work together.
Q. By becoming an activist, aren’t I setting myself up for disappointments?

A. Psychologist Leo Buscaglia said it best: “To reach out to another is to risk involvement. To expose feelings is to risk rejection. To place your dreams before the crowd is to risk ridicule...To go forward in the face of overwhelming odds is to risk failure. But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.”

Q. I am one person, and the problems we face today seem so huge. How can I make a difference?

A. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed. The way to avoid this, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., suggested, is to proceed at your own pace, step by step, breaking down our goals into manageable tasks—not worrying too much about the precise political impact of every action we take at any given time. Moreover, there’s an old saying among human and civil rights activists that’s worth remembering: “An individual can fight injustice, but only a community can do justice.”

Q. I understand that if you volunteer, it is very difficult to get other people to volunteer. Is that true?

A. Sure. Everyone’s very busy these days. The demands of work and home seem greater than ever. But people still volunteer. An army of volunteers across America was crucial in electing Barack Obama President. People still hunger for a higher purpose. It’s the challenge of the activist to herald a higher purpose.
“What we’re trying to do is draw people out of their private pain, out of their cynicism and passivity, and get them connected with other people in collective action.”—Ernie Cortes, community organizer
Start with you!

- What bothers you? Somebody ought to do something about _____ (fill in the blank).

- Get your facts straight about the issues that matter most to you. That’s essential. But remember: Facts alone don’t move people. Wishes, fears, and values are what move people.

- Look for the activist opportunity that fits you—your skills, personality, and values.

- Take the plunge. Make a difference. Become the change you want to see in the world.

- Jump on every professional development and training opportunity that comes your way in our Association—and there are many!

- Savor the journey.

Listen to others!

- Listen. It’s the first rule of organizing.

- Engage your colleagues in one-on-one conversations at every opportunity.

- When someone comes to you with a gripe, ask them: What are we going to do about it?

- Stay positive. Stay hopeful. Help people believe in themselves and what they can accomplish.
Organize!

- Don’t agonize, organize. Don’t intellectualize, organize.

- Organizing is, at its core, about building relationships. People are more likely to help if they have a relationship with you.

- If you want people to join with you in working on a common goal, ask them. Surveys show that 80 percent of volunteers doing community work said they began because they were asked by a friend, a family member, or a neighbor.

- The more personal the “ask” is, the more effective it will be. This means recruiting in person, at events or over the phone—not through e-mail or the mailbox.

- And simply asking is not enough—give reasons why they should volunteer. Why are they needed? What is the activity important? Why is this particular timing important?

- But be straight with volunteers. If an activity is tedious or difficult, own that and explain why it is still important. Credibility is crucial in maintaining this relationship.

- The more you can make volunteers feel they are special and part of a select team, the more ownership they will take for the activity and the Association. And the harder they will work.

- Never forget: One of the primary reasons people volunteer is to be part of something that serves a higher purpose.

- Stay connected. Communicate often. Have contact when you don’t need something. Look for easy opportunities to stay in touch.

- Keep in mind: Working for social justice, you are always going to be, as one gospel song puts it, “Climbing up the rough side of the mountain.”
Take Action

- Pick battles big enough to matter and small enough to win.
- Conditions are never just right. People who delay action until all factors are favorable end up doing nothing.
- Be quite clear with people about what you believe in. The principles that guide you are more important than the details of any policy.
- Whatever the issue, name your adversary and personalize the issue.
- We live by stories; we function and make sense of the world through stories.
- Create a compelling narrative that explains the cause you are fighting for. What’s your story? In this age of information overload and fragmentation, people yearn for a single narrative rather than ten thousand more bytes of information.
- A compelling narrative contains protagonists and antagonists; your story should make clear what you stand for, what you cannot stand, what your antagonist represents, and where you are headed.
- Involve colleagues in choosing tactics, and divide up and delegate work.
- Appreciate all contributions, no matter how small.
- Welcome criticism, and laugh at yourself.
- When trying to connect with people, especially over the Internet, remember they are barraged with messages; so pay attention to how you are going to get their attention. Cut through the clutter.
- When speaking to a group, keep in mind that they will remember how you made them feel long after they’ve forgotten what you said.
- When reaching out to your community for support, remember we are advocates for children, young people, and students—and the more we
weave our personal experiences with students into our message, the more effective an advocate we become.

- Celebrate your victories, however small; learn from your defeats and move on.

- Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is a process; working together is success.

- “You have the power. In your person. This is all the power we need. But you have to take responsibility. You’ve got to act.”—Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers

### Educate Politicians

- Because public policies and laws affect everything we do in our public schools and classrooms, we must work with politicians, and try, as best we can, to educate them.

- Everyone in politics seems to think that they know more about how to educate children then we do. They do not. We are the professionals.

- We must never let politicians define our vision, our convictions, or what we consider “possible.” Real change originates at the grassroots, not in the State Legislature or the Congress—and we are all about real change.

- We want and demand political leaders who act to make a difference. This is not a time for cautious souls; it’s a time for courage.

- Frederick Douglass was right: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice that will continue.”
“Passion is an energy...it’s an energy that exists in all of us, all the time. The question is not whether we have it but whether we access it, and how we channel it.”—Derrick Bell, professor of law

“Burnout” is a scary word whether you’re an educator or an activist or both. And Mr. Burnout will sneak up on you and pounce without warning.

How do activists avoid burnout?

Activism over time can leave you feeling drained of the passion that once drove you. And once your passion has ebbed, you’re just going through the motions.

Here are some tips for rekindling your passion:

- Give yourself time and space to reflect. Action without reflection can easily lead to monotony and emptiness. Reflection allows you to re-examine the roots of your activism and replenish your moral reserves.

- Pace yourself. Civil Rights activist Ysaye Barnwell, of the singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock, has compared social involvement to the process of making music. In both, she says, you can’t rush things. “Music has its rhythm and pace. You have to keep up with them, and not go too slow or too fast, or the song won’t work. You need to take all the time you need. You want to breathe, savor each note, and feel the spaces between the words that you sing.”

- Immerse yourself in an activity outside the cause that rejuvenates your soul. For some it might be art or music; for others, it might be sports or a walk in the park.

- Read *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time* by Paul Rogat Loeb (St. Martin’s Griffin 1999) and *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth* by Derrick Bell (Bloomsbury Publishing 2002). They are both amazing resources for activists.
“Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for five thousand years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental.”—W.E.B. Du Bois, Black educator and activist
Civil and Human Rights in the 21st Century: An Overview

What are human rights?

- Human rights are those rights that are essential to live as human beings. They affirm the dignity and worth of the human person. They are self-evident, inalienable, and universal.

- To deny a person their human rights is to deny his or her humanity.


- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. Its 30 Articles are considered the most definitive statement of human rights for the modern world.

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms every person’s right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as his or her freedom of opinion and expression; and freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

- Significantly, the Declaration of Universal Human Rights extended human rights to the workplace. It specifically states that everyone has the right to equal pay for equal work. What’s more, everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his or her interests. That’s right, union membership is a basic human right.

- The Declaration also states that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their families.

- In addition, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms education as a fundamental human right.
What are civil rights?

Civil rights are those rights guaranteed to citizens through a country’s constitution, laws, and court decisions.

The Bill of Rights to the Constitution (Amendments 1-10) sets forth our basic civil rights as American citizens, including our freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition; protection against unreasonable searches and seizures; and our right to due process of law, trial by jury, and assistance of counsel.

Additional Amendments to the Constitution have extended civil rights to groups originally left out by the Founders. For example, the 19th Amendment (1920) granted women the right to vote.

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) would require that: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” ERA has been ratified by 35 states, and it needs three more to become law.

The framers of our Constitution saw civil rights primarily as safeguards against government tyranny. But as time went on, the realization dawned that freedom from the tyranny of slavery, poverty, ignorance, and economic exploitation was just as important. And so, gradually, civil rights were extended to people originally excluded in 1787 by Constitutional Convention—and the very idea of civil rights has been expanded to embrace what we think of today as human rights.

Is the right to an education a basic civil right in the United States?

There is no explicit mention of education in the Constitution, and the right to an education does not derive from the Constitution.

In fact, in *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (1973), the Supreme Court held that education was not a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution, and it also rejected the claim that students were entitled to an equal education.
But the right to an education is entrenched at the state level and receives explicit recognition in most state constitutions. However, states still grapple with the issue of equitable and adequate funding for every child’s education.

What’s more, while the U.S. government is not constitutionally committed to the right to an education (that would require a Constitutional Amendment), the U.S. government, since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, has invested hundreds of billions of dollars in K-12 education.

**NEA: Education is a human and civil right**

For NEA, there are no ands, buts, or maybes about it. Public education is a fundamental human and civil right. Great public schools are a basic right for every student.

We believe public education is the gateway to opportunity. All students have the human and civil right to a quality public education that develops their potential, independence, and character.

We believe public education is vital to building respect for the worth, dignity, and equality of every individual in our democracy.

We believe public education is the cornerstone of our republic. Public education provides individuals with the skills to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy.

We believe public education is a necessity if our children and young people are going to thrive in today’s increasingly competitive, winner-take-all economy.

In other words, for us, the right to a quality public education is the most basic of human and civil rights. Because it is the essential enabling right—the prerequisite to fully exercising all the other rights that are our birthright as human beings.
Putting Our Values to Work

Why focus on human and civil rights in this day and age? Education

- NEA polling and focus groups show that we can cite many good reasons why public education matters, but none is more persuasive, more unassailable, more compelling with the public than education is a basic human and civil right.

- Great public schools are a basic right for every student—this is the very foundation of our advocacy.

- To deny any person, child or adult, his or her human and civil rights is to deny his or her humanity. But that is what our society does when it consigns children and young people to inferior schools—schools where teachers are underqualified and overwhelmed, underpaid and overworked...schools where class sizes that are too large...schools without up-to-date text books or information technologies.

- The existence of achievement gaps among different groups of students is living testimony that the human and civil right to a quality education has not yet been achieved.

- We are educators—people who care deeply that every child and young person has the opportunity to achieve his or her potential—and therefore, we will not abide the denial of a quality public education, a basic human and civil right, to any student.

- And in recent years, we have seen bullying and sexual harassment take a serious toll on student achievement. And sexual orientation and gender identity bias also impede student learning.

- Bullying, sexual harassment, and bias based on sexual orientation and gender identity are human and civil rights issues.

Why focus on human and civil rights in 21st Century? History

- There are other reasons as well to focus on human and civil rights.

- American history teaches us that while human and civil rights are precious, they are also precarious. They can be taken away at any time.
The decades after the Civil War, after a brief burst of freedom, saw the brutal repression of the human and civil rights of freed slaves, African Americans, and this repression continued well into the next Century.

At this same time, the human and civil rights of Chinese immigrants were being severely and systematically restricted. They were denied the right to own property, the right to vote, and access to public services.

And if the 19th Century seems too distant, just look at the 20th Century. In times of fear and stress, human and civil rights get trampled.

At the beginning of the Great Depression, for example, the federal government passed the Deportation Act that gave counties the power to send great numbers of Mexicans and Mexican Americans back to Mexico. Policy makers thought this would solve the unemployment problem. It did not. County officials in California and the Southwest organized “deportation trains,” and the Immigration Bureau made sweeps, arresting anyone who looked Mexican, especially if they were involved in union activities. Many of those sent to Mexico were native-born U.S. citizens who had never lived in Mexico. Between 1929 and 1935, some 450,000 to one million Mexicans and Mexican Americans were sent back to Mexico, making this one of the largest forced migrations in U.S. history.

During World War II, tens of thousands of Japanese and Japanese Americans were rounded up by the federal government, their property was confiscated, and these people, citizens and non-citizens alike, were put into detention camps scattered throughout the West in remote locations.

During the Cold War, thousands of Americans—artists, writers, directors, broadcasters, and teachers—lost their jobs because of their alleged sympathies for the Communist Party. It was called “the Red Scare.”

After 9/11, we saw people of Middle Eastern descent come under suspicion not because of anything they had done, but because of who they were and how they looked. Some were even incarcerated for long periods of time without benefit of a trial.
And in the current debate over immigration, we hear angry calls to “round them all up and send them back to where they came from.”

*History teaches that if you think your human and civil rights are secure and can never be taken away from you, think again.*

**Why focus on human and civil rights? Income and Health**

- Many children are growing up in poverty in the richest nation in the world; many children and adults do not have access to quality health care; many families are unemployed, underemployed, or work full-time but don’t earn a living wage.

- Income inequality in America has been growing for 30 years. The corporate elite are getting richer, and everyone else is getting either a few additional crumbs or poorer. For example, the real income (adjusted for inflation) of teachers between 1975 and 2005 rose only one percent! That qualifies as crumbs.

- Contributing to this income inequality trend has been: (1) the decline of labor unions in the private sector due largely to successful anti-union measures, (2) the export of high-paying manufacturing jobs abroad, and (3) the growing political clout of the wealthy and the corporations, which has enabled them to bend the tax system to their own interests.

- It has been said that a rising tide lifts all boats, but not if you don’t own a boat.

- The incomes of Black households today are 33 percent less than Whites; the incomes of Hispanic households are 40 percent less than Whites; and the income disparity between American Indians and Whites is even more glaring.

- Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians are far less likely than Whites to own their own homes.

- Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians are far less likely than Whites to have a college degree or to attend college.
In addition, Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians are less likely to have health insurance; they are less likely to have access to quality health care; and, most significantly, they have lower life expectancies than Whites. “Life,” it is worth recalling, is the first of the “unalienable rights,” cited in our Declaration of Independence.

**Why does NEA give out human and civil rights awards?**

- Because there is still so much to do, and we truly believe in “liberty and justice for all.”

- Because there are people who think that all of the great human and civil rights battles have already been fought and won—and they are wrong!

- Because by acknowledging those who work for human and civil rights, we lift our spirits and affirm our own commitment to human and civil rights.

- Because by honoring those who work for human and civil rights today, we pay homage to the brave men and women who came before us and fought for human and civil rights.

- Because it is part of our heritage—it is who we are: The National Education Association and the American Teachers Association, which merged into one Association in 1966, have a long and proud history of standing up for those whose humanity has been denied.
“First they ignore you. Then they ridicule you. Then they fight you. Then you win.”—Gandhi
The Activist’s Library

**Rules for Radicals**  
Saul Alinsky, Vintage Books, 1989  
The classic book about organizing people, written by one of America’s foremost organizers.

**Organize for Social Change**  
Midwest Academy Manual for Activists  
This is one of the best books about collective action and putting the screws to decision-makers. It’s about winning battles.

**Building More Effective Unions**  
Paul Clark, Cornell University Press, 2000  
Penn State Professor of Labor Studies Paul Clark applies the latest in behavioral sciences research to creating more effective unions. His insights are both astute and highly practical.

**The Trajectory of Change: Activist Strategies for Social Change**  
Michael Albert, South End Press, 2002  
*Z Magazine*’s Michael Albert has assembled a collection of thoughtful articles on ways to overcome various obstacles to social change.

**Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing**  
Lee Staples, Praeger, 1984  
This is a good nuts and bolts guide to organizing. It is especially good on recruiting, developing action plans, executing them, and dealing with counterattacks.
Putting Our Values To Work

Taking Action: Working Together for Positive Change in Your Community
Elizabeth Amer, Self Counsel Press, 1992
Written by a Toronto community activist, this book is easy to read, full of examples, and sprinkled with how-to-advice.

Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders
This book is well organized. You can find relevant material for your situation without reading the whole book.

Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth
Derrick Bell, Bloomsbury, 2002
A gem of a book that delves into the question of “Why become an Activist.” It is both thought-provoking and energizing.

Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time
Paul Rogat Loeb, St. Martins Press, 1999
Provides solace for the activist’s soul and juice for the activist’s battery.


Multiple cyber resources for activists: www.thefreelibrary.com/Cyber+activism-a053985012.

Best practices tool kit: www.Benton.org/Practice/Toolkit/.

Community organizing by ACORN: www.acorn.org.


Cyberspace resources for nonprofits: www.techsoup.org/.

Designing effective action alerts for the Internet: http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/alerts.html.

Remixing the Web for social change: www.netsquared.org/tags/cyber-activism.