

An Interview with NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Dennis Van Roekel, a 23-year teaching veteran and longtime activist and advocate for quality education, became president of the 3.2 million-member National Education Association in September.

Prior to his election at this year's Representative Assembly, the high school math teacher from Paradise Valley High School in Phoenix, Arizona, served two terms each as NEA Vice President and NEA Secretary-Treasurer and has held key positions in all levels of the Association. During his time as an NEA leader, Van Roekel showed a keen awareness of higher education issues and an ongoing interest in enhancing the role of higher education within the Association.

Dennis Van Roekel grew up in Iowa, where parents, teachers, and the community instilled in him a deep sense of the value of education and the understanding that education opens countless doors of opportunity. His future career path was sealed in the seventh grade when he decided to become a teacher. But while Van Roekel knew it was his job to impart knowledge and a love of learning to his students, he realized early in his teaching career that delivering a quality education to all students and serving the collective needs of all educators go hand-in-hand. "To me, teaching and being an Association activist are part of the same thing," he says. Van Roekel earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Iowa in Iowa City and a master's degree in math education from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

In this exclusive interview with Thought & Action, NEA's new president addresses the need for NEA to play a more prominent role in higher education policy development in the states and at the national level. In addition, he argues forcefully, NEA needs to integrate the activities of both its higher education members and more populous K-12 members in all the Association's activities, especially now when higher education is increasingly important for more and more students.

THOUGHT & ACTION: The pre-K to graduate school concept, the seamless web of education. What does it mean?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL To many practitioners, it means starting with pre-school and creating one interrelated educational experience for a student, all the way through graduate school. I think much of the research on learning that's been going on now suggests we should think of education as a lifelong process—from birth through graduate school and beyond. All of those committed to this principle must work to strengthen the linkages between pre-K-12 and higher education.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Is education different now than it was, say, 50 years ago, so that we have to look at it differently?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: The world has changed, and we have to change. When you think about what our system of education was designed to do, 50 years ago or 100 years ago, compared to now, we're preparing students for a very different world.

For example, look at the number of new jobs that are going to require education and training beyond high school. Fifty years ago, if you finished high school, you were done. Your education was completed, and you went to work. Only a small percentage of high school graduates went on to college. Now it's much different.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Are we talking about a complete restructuring of education in the United States?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: The word I like to use is transformation. Education is moving into its next natural phase. It's not that someone has done anything wrong. The world has changed, and we need to think how we—educators—can also change, to serve the needs of students. Sometimes, people focus on the system, rather than who it's designed to serve. When you think about education from the point of a student, it makes a great deal of sense to have a seamless process, instead of the disconnected systems we have now.

THOUGHT & ACTION: What role are educators, actual educators, playing in this restructuring, and is it a prominent enough role?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: It's not prominent enough. We're not invited to the table, in many instances, and we should be. But, it's also our responsibility to talk about what is needed from our professional point of view.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, in which NEA plays a prominent role, is an affirmative movement to articulate a vision for 21st century learning, with authentic standards in learning and, just as important, systems that will

enable students to meet those standards. Standards-based education is not a good solution when you have the wrong standards in place. So we need to get these things right in the formative stages. And as we look forward, we as educators should have a clear idea about what we are preparing our students to do in 10 years. Not only must we be invited to these discussions, we should advocate our own solutions about what kind of educational transformation is needed, based on how we see the world changing around us.

THOUGHT & ACTION: **Some see the move to align higher education and K-12 as an attempt to bring the standardization and teach-to-the-test mentality of the No Child Left Behind Act to higher education. Is there a danger that the seamless web of education will mean higher education develops the undesirable standardization that plagues K-12?**

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: I know that fear exists. And there are moves to standardize certain aspects of higher education. Our affiliates in Wisconsin, Wyoming, and South Dakota are currently struggling with standardization efforts in terms of curriculum and academics. Obviously, we must pay careful attention to anything that moves us in that direction. The best way for faculty to respond to decisions that threaten their traditional responsibilities is to get involved in P-16 or P-21 initiatives and be part of the decision-making that's taking place. Ultimately, I believe the potential to maximize student success by aligning higher education and K-12 should outweigh the fears.

THOUGHT & ACTION: **Are there examples of where this seamless web venture is working for students?**

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: Currently, the pre-K to G initiative is not a well-defined concept. You have to look at the programs state by state. It's not fair to assume they're all the same and then try to assign a value of either good or bad to them. You have to evaluate them individually and promote the good ones and oppose the ones that won't work so well.

One initiative I've come across that intrigues me is in Connecticut. It's called the CommPACT, and it's a partnership of parents, the community, teachers unions, the College of Education at the University of Connecticut, and the NEA Foundation focused on closing the achievement gaps in eight inner-city schools.

This kind of effort is an important component of the seamless web. We often think of the pre-K to G movement as the transition of students from high school to college. Maybe you go to college a year earlier or you earn credit while you're

still in high school. But I think of it as much more than that.

In the CommPACT initiative, faculty from the University of Connecticut will work side by side with teachers. And the most critical component is that the decision-making takes place at the building level. So the College of Education comes in and says, “Here are the three programs or curricula that we found, based on our research, have a positive impact on closing achievement gaps at the early ages. Which of these do you want to use?” Then the university faculty, the teachers, and the community work together to make the programs effective. That’s a very different way of working proactively and viewing how the pieces all fit together. And I think that’s exciting.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Why should NEA higher ed members be concerned about pre-K to graduate school initiatives?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: The vast majority of our K-12 members were trained in those colleges and universities where our higher education members teach. That’s one big connection. The vast majority of students our higher education members are teaching come through our K-12 system. The interdependence just seems so obvious.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Some of our NEA members in higher education feel that they will not be at the table when NEA makes decisions about the seamless web. Are these fears justified?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: No, higher education members will be at the table within our organization. One of the things that I think works against NEA being seen as a pre-K to G organization is that the largest concentration of our higher education members are in very few states. More than 80 percent of NEA’s higher education members are in 10 states. That leaves a whole lot of states that don’t have higher education members and, consequently, just aren’t aware of higher education issues. Somehow, we have to increase the awareness in those states of the importance of higher education.

Last year, the Advisory Committee on Membership dealt with the question: What would NEA have to do to really be seen as an organization that speaks for pre-K to G? We need to keep working at that. As we talk about a seamless web of education, we need to make sure our higher ed members are involved. I would love for the outside world to see NEA as an organization of all educators, representing all levels, including universities and colleges.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Could you talk more about the charge you gave to the Advisory Committee on Membership, to help define NEA as the voice of higher education. How do you see that progressing?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: The subcommittee on higher education members completed the first draft, and they were ready to take it to the next draft. I know they could have done it in another two or three meetings. But I said, please don't. What we need to do is to find a way to build this conversation with others beyond the advisory committee.

I don't believe the way NEA becomes an organization that is truly pre-K to G is by someone defining the answer and giving it to everyone else. That's how it works now. There needs to be a process that actually engages people. Through engagement, we need to enable states that don't have members in higher education to understand how NEA becoming a pre-K to G organization affects them, and vice versa. Everyone needs to understand that we—pre-K, K-12, higher education—are in this together. But that understanding comes through engaging people—you can't just tell them.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Do you see a possibility of the entire organization engaging or taking part in this discussion?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: Absolutely. The only way it will ever become an organizational issue is if the whole organization talks about it. But this presents challenges. I have to find ways to get into conversations with the Board of Directors about seeing ourselves as a pre-K through G organization. There have to be conversations between K-12 and higher education. We don't do enough of that. Regional conferences, for example, have very little in the area of higher education programming. How do you change that? And, if you're in a region that has very few higher education members, who would go to a session if it's seen only as higher education? We've got to find a way around that. In addition, NEA will have to do more in the policy area of higher education if we're to be taken seriously as a pre-K to G organization. Our voice needs to be heard dealing with policy issues and other questions for higher education on a national level. This is a key role of the national organization.

NEA: Will K-12 members be interested in NEA playing a larger role in higher education policy nationally?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: Is it possible for higher education to survive and thrive in America and have K-12 collapse? The answer is no, I don't believe that's

possible. Can K-12 flourish and succeed if higher education doesn't? No, of course not. Once you start seeing the relationship, that we're in this together, I think it's much easier.

Making connections between higher education and K-12 is not such a new idea. Think of the National Defense Education Act of 1958. A lot of that investment was in creating ways for higher education to interact with K-12. The science institutes are one example. These were six-week sessions held in the summer, in which higher education faculty in science and math helped K-12 teachers keep up to date with developments in their disciplines, which of course helped them do a better job in their classrooms. So it really was, again, an example of this natural connection.

THOUGHT & ACTION: **Are there legitimate differences in the interest of K-12 NEA members and higher education members? And, at the same time, are there areas where our interests coincide?**

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: I think the one thing that is fundamentally different is how we're funded. This affects a lot of things, and in some cases puts us in competition with one another.

Without going into a lot of detail, the Reagan policies in the 1980s of cutting federal aid to the states left the states in a serious financial bind. The cutbacks made it tough for them to balance their budgets. It's another thing that drove higher ed and K-12 apart. As the states took care of the required funding of K-12, higher education saw double-digit cuts in state funding and, consequently, higher tuition. What you ended up with in a number of states is higher education and K-12 going to the governors and legislatures and battling over scarce resources.

We also ended up with a college affordability problem, which remains a huge issue right now. At the very time when we're saying more and more students need to have access to training and education beyond high school, higher education is becoming less and less affordable to more and more students.

On the other hand, I think our members in higher education and K-12 agree on the importance of providing quality education to all students at all levels. I used to talk about the American Dream with my students. Sometimes they would act as if I was corny or old-fashioned—but I did it anyway. I believe in the American Dream. And our members believe that the foundation of that dream is education. They also know that quality education from birth through graduate school is what our students will need to reach that dream in the future. So, K-12 and higher education interests definitely are aligned. How we accomplish what we're all trying to do may vary because of different systems and funding.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Do you have any advice for higher ed members on how to work more effectively with their K-12 colleagues in their state associations?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: Yes, get involved. Provide support. Take action. The model of the Advisory Committee on Membership that we formed back in 1992, when the organization went through what we called the streamlining process, is a wonderful concept. The committee is made up of seven higher education members, seven education support professionals, and seven K-12 members, as well as one retired and one student representative. The idea is, instead of always having separate committees or different constituency groups, or (in this group) levels of education, there's a point where you have to be in the same room—not proportionally, but all with the same voice—saying, “How do we make this one organization?” I think we need to make that happen in more places.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Are there specific ways that someone at, say, a community college in a particular place might connect with the local school district members?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: In any state where they're forming these P-16 or P-20 councils, I think there's a natural place for the leadership of both higher education and K-12 to work together and collaborate in the interests of improving education for students in their states. Another thing—we always want someone else to understand our issues. And, as an organization, we do that a lot. It's just as important to understand the other person's issues. K-12 must reach out and understand the issues from the higher education perspective, and vice versa. The only way you can really advocate effectively is when you know each other's interests. That takes communication and collaboration, and getting together and supporting each other.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Moving from the general to a more specific issue that our members are dealing with in some places, how do we, within the Association, resolve competition between K-12 members and higher education members on such things as dual enrollment courses?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: One of the things that gets us in that situation is we're reacting to someone else's idea. A better way of dealing with that kind of issue is to get out in front of it. Let's work together and figure out together how to make this work, both for students and for us. And then, we can go advocate with a common voice and also respond to other agendas.

But if we don't take the time to say what makes sense from each of our

perspectives on a particular issue, we end up reacting to someone else's proposal. This is one more reason it makes sense for us to come together.

These dual-enrollment initiatives are happening everywhere. I often wonder whether the right questions are being asked as these initiatives are taking place. As a math teacher, the example I always use is, for years there was a debate about whether students should be allowed to use calculators in the classroom. I think it was the wrong question. Would any one of us balance our checkbook without a calculator? The right question should have been, when do you want students to use calculators and when not? So, as we face these changes, are we asking the right questions?

THOUGHT & ACTION: What are some of the questions we should be asking?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: Where does the money flow, and who gets it? Should a college offer online courses free to a high school student and charge a college student? And what are the standards? If you're the college faculty member teaching a course, you have academic freedom. But someone else—a high school teacher, for example—doesn't. Can this work?

I've read enough on systems change to know that it's far more important to ask the right questions than it is to try and get the right answers. Because if you have the wrong questions, it really doesn't make any difference what your answers are.

A sea change is underway in how the nation educates its students. Higher education and K-12 need to ask, how do we see this transformation working for us, for students, and for the country as a whole?

THOUGHT & ACTION: To move to our final topic, how does the Association address questions in the larger society? What role do you see the Association playing nationally in the creation of this pre-K to graduate school seamless web?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: I would hope that we play a much bigger role than we have in the past, and to do this, we have to be willing to reach beyond our own "borders." Sometimes we talk among ourselves and think we have an answer. Then we expect the rest of the world to just accept it. That model doesn't work. We have to go out and talk to people who don't necessarily agree with us. And we have to reach out and build a common understanding with people who see the world differently than we do. I think that's a critical area for us in the future.

THOUGHT & ACTION: You mentioned college affordability as a critical issue, would you elaborate on that?

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: I don't know where I saw this, but the picture remains in my head: It was a chart listing low, medium, and high academic achievement for various socioeconomic groupings. What the chart showed was that the highest academic achievers in the low-income group had the same probability of going to college as the lowest academic achievers in the wealthiest group. Affordability is the main reason we're not giving these bright kids an opportunity to go to college.

THOUGHT & ACTION: **At different times in history, NEA had a tremendous influence on educational policy at all levels in the United States. Are we still influential in terms of influencing policy? And, if we're not, how do we get there?**

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: I'm not satisfied with the level of influence NEA has on educational policy. How we get there, I think, is through our collective voice. And, there's not just one way to do that. Part of it is through bargaining. Part of it is through political action. Part of it is building partnerships. Those are the routes to securing influence and shaping outcomes.

We have to have influence at the federal level because so much could be accomplished there, and that's what NEA can do for higher education, as well as K-12.

I loved it, the first time I heard someone say, "We have the National Institutes of Health. What if we had the National Institutes of Educational Research?" States don't have the capacity or the resources to do all of their own research in educational practice. Wouldn't it be great if the federal government did that? Sixty million dollars a year in the federal budget is nothing. With a 10-year commitment, we could really do some incredible work. We could, for example, delve into the scholarship of teaching and develop authentic assessments, so we really do know if students are learning.

THOUGHT & ACTION: **I think you've answered this question in various ways, but I'll ask it specifically: What do you see in the future for the relationship of K-12 and higher education within NEA?**

DENNIS VAN ROEKEL: I think it's going to get much stronger. We've made progress in identifying how best to organize in the higher ed community. But we'll have to do more. We need to ask what do we change as an institution in order to organize and service higher education most effectively, at the same time we're providing for K-12? Maybe there are more connections than we realize. But, the way the world is changing, there's a need for all of us—pre-K, K-12, higher education—to be working together. So we're going to have to do it well. 

