

**Remarks for Delivery**  
**NEA President Dennis Van Roekel**  
**NEA Representative Assembly**  
**July 3, 2013 – Georgia World Congress Center**

Thank you, Lily, for that kind introduction. And thank you, delegates, for your warm welcome.

Fifty years ago this summer, a preacher from Atlanta stood at the Lincoln Memorial in DC, and delivered one of the most famous speeches of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

That great leader, of course, was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His church, Ebenezer Baptist, sits only about a mile from here.

His words that day ... “I Have a Dream ...” captured the heart and hopes of a nation. To this day, they inspire us ... lift us up ... and challenge us.

And all these years later, Dr. King’s Dream still calls to us. And so we maintain hope. We continue the struggle. We don’t give up.

And we, the National Education Association, we understand that Dr. King’s dreams and our values of equal opportunity, a just society, are inextricably linked to equity in public education.

That connection, that link – makes us who we are.

When we talk about “DNA” . . . specifically, NEA’s “DNA” – we mean the ideas and values that are central to our identity.

As the science teachers in the room will gladly tell you, DNA comes in strands ... and our DNA has three.

One strand is our work for social justice. This goes back to our beginning 156 years ago - before the Civil War - when 47 educators gathered for the call to create the NEA. Since then, we have been a strong and consistent voice for equal opportunity in education, economic and civil rights for all.

Another strand is standing up for the rights of our members and affiliates. We do this at the bargaining table, in the courts, and in the halls of state legislatures and Congress.

We engage in collective action every day, fighting attacks against public education, attacks on workers’ rights and the middle class, wherever and whenever they arise.

The third strand is our work as professionals – it’s the reason we say, “NEA – We Educate America!”

It’s what we do every day as individuals, but also what we do together as an organization ... working to lead our professions, and taking responsibility for our own professional practice.

We believe that each one of us, as an educator, plays a critical role in student success. If we didn’t believe that, we wouldn’t be here.

These three strands of DNA are part of our nature. They are embodied in our core values, mission, and vision. And what binds these three strands together is the passion our members have for students, and for public education.

These three strands have guided us throughout our 156-year journey – even when the path at times was rocky.

And at some points along the way, we reached crossroads – defining moments in our history. At these critical times, we always had the courage to pursue our dreams and demonstrate our commitment through actions.

The 1966 merger with the American Teachers Association, right here in Atlanta – was a pivotal moment in our work for social justice. That courageous action sent a message to the entire world about NEA and what we value.

In the 47 years since, our commitment is evident throughout NEA’s programs, activities, and training – from lobbying for civil rights legislation and fair immigration laws, to fighting discriminatory policies at all levels.

In the 1970s, NEA took another bold step and moved into the political arena and collective bargaining. NEA had always advocated for education professionals but this courageous action transformed the NEA. Many of our members risked their jobs, and even went to jail, to win bargaining rights, to stand up against unfair labor laws, to fight for universal education, to lobby for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and to demand equal rights for women.

Those were defining moments for this association. Our leaders and our members overcame opposition – internal and external – they defeated fear and dared to take a stand not only for themselves but also for their students.

Now we have reached another crossroads.

For us, the current leaders in NEA - this is *our* defining moment.

And we must show the same courage and commitment shown by our predecessors when they faced their own moment of truth.

You see, Dr. King not only spoke about his Dream, he called people to action.

He warned that there was no time to “engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”

He spoke of the “fierce urgency of now.”

We must act with that same “urgency of now” ... because the struggle for equity in education has never been more *urgent* ... and our members have never faced a greater series of threats.

*Our time is now. And it's time for ACTION!*

It is time for *us* to transform public education – by taking charge of *our* professions, and that means taking responsibility for our professions – and not allowing others to define it for us.

We have laid the foundation throughout our history – this is not new work, but it is time for a bold step forward.

We have three million members, and we have proved beyond a doubt that we are a powerful force for social justice, and for our members' rights.

Now we must use our power, individually and collectively, to do what is important to every single one of us - do what binds us together more than anything else: Fulfill the promise of public education – prepare EVERY student to succeed.

If we are going to take charge of our own professions, if we want to move beyond the old debate that has been defined by others – and replace their kind of solutions with our solutions – then *We* must decide how to define . . . and achieve excellence in our own professions!

I spend a lot of time listening to higher ed faculty, teachers and ESPs talk about the challenges they face, as well as their aspirations for what public education could be.

And I am dismayed by the gap, the huge gap, between the realities we live with each day – and our own Dreams for public education.

The realities of inadequate funding, overuse and misuse of testing, misguided and unproven policies – they consume our time and energy as we tackle problem after problem – stopping what we don't want – debating “other people's” solutions.

Meanwhile, our dreams, our dreams of success for all students, love of learning, collaboration, and respect for all educators – those dreams seem to be placed on hold, and seem too far away.

The bad news is that our country has no shortage of people with ideas about how to change schools. They think anyone can be an “education reformer” – no experience or expertise necessary!

Who are these people?

Some are probably well meaning – they're just misguided.

Others are not well meaning at all! Many are driven by ideology – they don't believe in public education, or unions, or both. They'll jump at any chance to undermine public schools or weaken our unions.

And of course, there's good old-fashioned greed. Some people attacking public education say they care about student success – but their actions speak louder than their words – and their actions clearly say that they care about only one thing – profits! BIG profits – and they'll spend whatever it takes to divert public education funds into their own pockets.

These people are in it for money and notoriety. They want to produce movies about privatization and distract the public from the good things educators do every day. For them, good news doesn't sell. That's not a money-maker.

And make no mistake – when we see the push for their kind of policies, in state after state, it is no coincidence. It is an orchestrated attack on public education.

So we must fight back – and we are.

In March we filed a lawsuit in Florida. One of the plaintiffs is Kim Cook, a first-grade teacher.

Last year, Kim was Teacher of the Year in her school. This year she received an unsatisfactory rating – not based on her teaching, but on the test scores of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders at a different elementary school!

Students she has never taught or met.

Can you imagine a doctor being held accountable for a patient she's never treated? Or a lawyer disbarred because of a case that was mishandled by another firm? Those professionals wouldn't stand for that – and neither will we!

Let's be clear about this. We are not resistant to change. And we are not satisfied with the Status Quo. But we will resist short-sighted and damaging solutions for one simple reason – **THEY DON'T WORK FOR STUDENTS!**

But resisting is not enough. The fact is, even if we eliminated all the bad ideas, we still wouldn't be satisfied. We will never be satisfied until every student has a great public school.

Good, sustainable change doesn't "just happen". Changing our complex education system will be difficult – and it will require much from us. Even leading change from within cannot succeed if we too are not willing to change.

We need to shift – shift from focusing on what we don't want – to focusing on what we do want.

While some might be satisfied to talk about what's popular or profitable, we must engage in conversations about why we do what we do – why it's worth doing – and why we are willing to act on what matters to us and our students.

I've always been especially inspired by one Robert Kennedy quote: *"Some people see things as they are and ask, why? I dream of things that never were and ask, why not?"*

For those who "see things as they are", the conversation usually moves to blame and scapegoating, and to solutions that don't address the real needs of students, solutions that undermine our efforts for equity.

When I look at children who are just starting school, I can't help but think about the system as it currently is ... and I know that too many of them will not succeed – will not be given the opportunity to follow their dreams. A million drop-outs a year – and in ten short years, 10 million young people facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century without hope or any real opportunities.

Frankly, I'm tired of the negative know-it-alls – tired of only playing defense and fighting to stop the bad ideas that seem to come from all sides. Don't misunderstand – of course we need to do that – and we will continue to do so.

But I also know that it drains me of my own dreams, of all the things that inspired me as a teacher.

And I'm tired of our nation accepting as good enough, a system that fails to deliver for all students - especially students of color and those who are poor.

I want more – I want NEA and our nation to stand up and declare that we will no longer accept nor tolerate an education system that doesn't live up to our American ideals!

I want to dream and fight for what could be – to dream of things that never were and ask “Why not?”

Each of you, think a moment about your greatest hopes and aspirations. Imagine in your mind the school where you want to work, where you want your kids and grandkids – and everybody's kids - to attend. Imagine how it would look. Imagine how it would feel to be there.

I know that vision, that dream, is not your current reality – And I need to ask you: “Why not?” Seriously, I mean, why not?

If we can see and feel what we want to create, then what's stopping us? More important, what are we willing to do to make it happen? How committed are we to move our dream to our reality?

Commitment - an interesting concept. I often challenged my high school students to decide which level of commitment they were willing to embrace – whether in academics, athletics, music, drama, or life.

I'd ask them – how serious are you? Are you willing to “try”? Or maybe commit to “doing your best”? Or are you willing to really go after your dream – and do “whatever it takes” to achieve it?

When it comes to fulfilling the promise of public education – I say we must do more than “try”, do more than “give our best” . . . I say we must choose to do whatever it takes!

That choice – to consciously CHOOSE to do whatever it takes – it empowers us in a way that fires me up, energizes, and inspires me.

Imagine one of your newer members saying, “My union helped me realize my professional potential. I'm better at my practice because we not only demand excellence from our students and schools; we demand it of each other. My union creates the conditions for my students' success and my success.”

Imagine if all educators – including our ESPs – had real opportunities to improve their practice through professional development.

Imagine if educators had the time to learn, time to grow and time to collaborate. And not after work or on weekends, but as part of their professional day!

We need millions of educators to be given the opportunity to use their incredible talents and creativity to define solutions that work for students.

We need to empower our members to create change: student-centered, union-led change!

We must embrace and engage all who work in public education - and that includes demanding the professional respect and professional compensation for our ESP members.

Want to transform a school? Bring together all of the adults who work there and empower them to define student success, to create a plan to accomplish it and then get out of their way and let them go!

Education professionals, working together, can change the world!

I believe that. I *know* that - because it's already happening.

- More students in New Jersey are taking advanced science courses thanks to a program of the NJ Center for Teaching and Learning – a Center created by NJEA. This program has prepared more physics and science teachers than all of the universities in New Jersey combined. It started at the classroom level, and now NEA is helping it expand to states across the country.
- Take a look at Rogers High School in Spokane, Washington. Suspensions are down and graduation rates are up, thanks in great part to a home visit program organized by Debby Chandler, WEA's ESP of the year.
- In Arizona, accomplished teachers at Pinnacle Peak Elementary School help new teachers learn by allowing them to watch their classrooms in real time, through webcams.
- In Montgomery County, Maryland, African American and Latino students are not only taking AP courses at much higher rates than the national average – the percentage of those who score a 3 or higher on the AP exam is double and triple the national average! That success was driven by collaboration and hard work. And they didn't just talk about cultural competence – teachers developed a graduate program in equitable instruction where teachers learned about the impact of ethnicity in classrooms, and culturally reflective practice.
- In Columbus Ohio, students are staying in school and serving their community, thanks to a union-led collaborative project in service-learning.
- Our members - like math teacher Peggy Brookins of Ocala (*O-KAL-ah*) Florida - helped develop the new Common Core standards. And our members are helping one another prepare for the transition to these new standards.

There are hundreds more examples like these - in every corner of the country!

That's the kind of change I'm talking about – **Student-Centered, Union-led change.**

And we need to do more – lots more!

And I know we can.

Not only because it's already happening in some places, but also because I know what's in your hearts.

I know the kind of energy you bring to this challenge.

I know the passion and commitment that called each of you to your profession – and what keeps you there, day after day, despite all the challenges and obstacles.

But good intentions are not enough. Hope alone is not a strategy. Wishing is not winning.

It takes time and money to create programs, to provide professional training and support, and to collaborate with other educators.

So we must empower our members to create change. Some don't like the Association's focus on quality, quality in the classroom and in schools. But if we don't empower educators to take control of how to define quality then who will?

Congress? Governors? State politicians? Michelle Rhee? Maybe the Koch Brothers?

No - it must be us.

This is about educators as *leaders*, not just *doers*.

It's about making policy decisions, not merely carrying out someone else's ideas.

It's about leveraging our work, creating solutions, so that it becomes greater than the sum of all our own individual efforts.

And there is an entity that can absolutely fill that role.

Our union: the National Education Association.

We can do it because **We Educate America** ... from pre-K to Graduate, in every state and around the world.

We have the expertise... the know-how ... the people . . . and we have the leaders!

We not only *can* do it ... we *must* do it.

That is what the Great Public Schools amendment is all about.

It's about creating a groundswell of alternatives to the corporate reformers and privateers, - our ideas, our solutions - so we can drive them *out* - out of our *classrooms*, out of our *profession*, and out of our students' *lives*!

It's about giving our members resources and support to fight for their dreams of what education could be.

It's about showing the nation that *we* are not only the experts in supporting student success but that we are willing and able to accept responsibility for that success.

I believe that over the long term, good ideas will drive out bad ideas. That's why fighting bad ideas is not enough.

We must be champions for quality in every classroom, every school. And we must use every tool at our disposal – lobbying, organizing, bargaining, our ideas and our energy.

So If you are tired of a reporting system to parents that focuses only on test scores and not the whole child – then why not collaborate with your colleagues and create your own?

If you can identify students right now who you think won't succeed in the current system, then why not go to the bargaining table or the community and demand interventions?

If your district isn't providing professional development for the implementation of the Common core State Standards, then why not create your own - using NEA support and resources?

If kids in your neighborhood are denied the opportunity for quality pre-K programs, then why not sponsor union-led workshops for parents and provide them with ideas and tools to assist their children?

And stop asking or waiting for permission – Proceed until apprehended!

The amendment is about tapping into the passion and power of our members. The passion to care for ALL of our students. The power to make a difference in their lives.

We are already creating ripples of change – now it's time to turn them into a tidal wave!

A tidal wave of change: Student-Centered, and Union-led!

Since we met last summer, there have been some horrible tragedies involving public schools and students across the country.

The shootings in Newtown ... the abduction of a student off a school bus in Alabama ... the tornadoes in Oklahoma.

In every one of these tragedies, the whole country saw educators emerge as heroes ...

The bus driver in Alabama who gave his life to protect the kids.

The teacher in Newtown who spent the last moments of her life hiding her students so they would be safe.

The teacher and parapro in Oklahoma who shielded students with their own bodies to protect them from the deadly tornado.

It's impossible to know what was going through their minds at the moments when they demonstrated such heroic courage.

But I'm pretty sure that when they went to work that morning, none of them was thinking about being a hero.

They were probably thinking what educators think every day: *How can I help my students succeed?*

I know that you, and millions of educators across the country, go to work every single day with that very same thought.

And although most of us will never be called upon to put our lives on the line, you demonstrate every day that a hero is a person who will do whatever it takes to help their students.

Every day you stand between them and the forces that would try to rip their dreams away. And you do it with courage, compassion and dedication.

How many of you have ever stepped in to help a student who was being bullied – in the hallway, on the playground, on a bus? If you have, please raise your hand. (*Keep them up*)

How many have comforted a student who was suffering because of trouble at home? Raise your hand.

How many have reached into your own pocket to buy supplies or food for students who couldn't afford it? Raise your hand.

How many chose education because you wanted to make a difference for students? Raise your hand.

Look around this room. Look at all the hands ... thank you.

This room - our association - is full of heroes, who everyday show the courage to fight for their students' hopes and dreams.

That courage is one of the first lessons we teach our students. Courage is not the absence of fear or uncertainty – courage is the willingness to confront fear and uncertainty - and acting in spite of fear to pursue your dreams.

That courage can be found in even the smallest act. Think about children first learning to raise their hands in class. It can be a little scary!

You think you know the right answer, but what if you're wrong? You want to ask a question but you're too afraid or too shy.

So students learn pretty quickly: It takes courage to raise your hand.

It also takes courage for students to believe in their own dreams – and it takes courage for adults, too.

It took courage 50 years ago, for those hundreds of thousands of people to march in Washington DC, demanding Freedom, Justice, and Jobs.

It took courage for Dr. King to stand before the nation and not only tell us his Dream – but to demand action – not sometime in the future, but now!

It took courage for NEA members to risk their jobs, and their freedom, to win the rights that we have today.

And yes, it will take courage for us to raise our hands today and show the nation that NEA, the largest labor union in the country, is committed to change ... that we take responsibility for student success ... and that we will empower our members to make those changes!

So I ask you today: Do you believe that our three million members know how to improve student success?

Do you believe that this is *our* time to create union-led change in our classrooms?

Do you believe that NOW is the time for action?

Then I ask you – Raise your hand for the success of ALL students!

Raise your hand for Great Public Schools and Social Justice!

Raise your hand for America's Educators, for America's Future!

Raise your hand for NEA – We Educate America! ... Thank you!