Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

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Thank you Dennis, Lily, Becky, members of the Executive Committee, the NEA Board of Directors, delegates, and the NEA staff. I’d like to recognize and honor five leaders who have been my colleagues and mentors in this association. They’ve given decades of service to the organization.

They are five State Executive Directors who will be retiring: from Washington State, John Okamoto; from New York, Pauline Kinsella; from New Jersey, Vince Giordano; from California, Carolyn Doggett; and the Dean of the State Executive Directors from the Great state of Ohio, Larry Wicks.

Please join me in thanking them for all they have done to improve the lives of millions of students, educators and community members in their states and across this country.

Happy 4th of July, NEA!

Celebrating our nation’s independence is something we do each year with great pride….pride in our national resolve….pride in our democratic system of government….pride in being a land of freedom and great opportunity.

It’s so powerful to be here in Atlanta, the birthplace of many great leaders, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the home of so much civil rights history. As Dennis reminded us all yesterday, we are approaching the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington.

I’m proud that the NEA will participate in this historic event, just as we did 50 years ago. In Washington and across the country, we will remind our students and our communities that the “Dream” lives on….that it’s worth fighting for….that it is essential to becoming a more perfect union.

When I addressed this body last year, I called upon all of us to be “[social justice patriots](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr2GJffpsZ8).”

Well this past year, NEA members yet again have been shining examples of social justice patriotism, forging paths of greater opportunity for students, fighting against injustices, and standing with communities in the face of hardships and too many tragedies.

NEA members from Pennsylvania, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin trained with us and the NAACP to fight voter suppression. Thank you social justice patriots!

And NEA members in TX held town hall meetings and clinics to ensure that undocumented students can gain access to college to pursue their dreams. Thank you social justice patriots!

NEA members in Connecticut, New York, Colorado, Maryland, California, and Delaware worked with your governors to pass stronger laws to prevent senseless tragedies like Sandy Hook. Thank you again social justice patriots!

NEA affiliates in Maine, Maryland, Rhode Island, Washington, and Minnesota stood with the LGBTQ community against bigotry and for marriage equality. Thank you social justice patriots!

And speaking of marriage equality, how about that wonderful Supreme Court decision striking down the Defense of Marriage Act!!

NEA, I hope you will join me now in giving a tremendous round of applause to NEA’s General Counsel, Alice O’Brien, and her legal team for joining with our partners at Change to Win and the AFL-CIO to submit a brief in this case and help make history.

Alice, your leadership with your colleagues from other unions and organizations has been simply outstanding!

You know, with all of this historic action at the Supreme Court, I’ve been thinking a lot about the word justice.

By definition, the word justice is the principle of moral rightness, the quality of being fair.

I think about our nation’s founders. As revolutionaries, it took courage and commitment to disrupt the status quo in order to create a brighter future. Their fight was about opportunity—opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is this spirit that has fueled generation after generation of Americans with an almost insatiable appetite for opportunity.

But sisters and brothers, we know that in order to truly have equal opportunity, we must seek justice. And we know that justice is not freely given. It is forged out of struggle and sacrifice.

Next May we’ll celebrate the 60th anniversary of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision--one of the greatest contributions to equity of educational opportunity in our lifetime. The case launched the full racial integration of our public schools. It gave momentum to the entire Civil Rights movement.

Chief Justice Earl Warren in writing the Court’s decision in 1954 said:

*“In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.”*

As we all know, the declaration in *Brown* was that separate schools for black and white children were inherently unequal. But the spirit of *Brown* was really about whether all children should have the same opportunities to learn.

And since 1954, we’ve made some great strides toward expanding opportunities for students. From Title IX to IDEA to guaranteeing English language learners equal access to education, NEA has been there fighting for students.

But since the 1970’s, we’ve seen a systematic dismantling of many of the pillars of opportunity in this country--pillars that impact educational success and therefore impact our economic, social, and cultural vitality as a nation.

We’ve seen weaker enforcement of desegregation orders. We’ve struggled to maintain affirmative action programs in education. We’ve seen inaction by the federal government to guarantee equity of opportunity. And in state courts and capitols, the promise of *Brown* remains elusive.

Now, here’s the appalling irony, my friends.

Every state constitution in the nation requires that states provide education to their children. Yet in 45 states in this country, citizens have found it necessary to sue their governments for violating those constitutional responsibilities.

And two thirds of these cases have been successful!

But time after time, we’ve watched state governments fail to adhere to court-ordered mandates to provide educational opportunity.

So for students and families, what good is a constitution if its words are merely lofty rhetoric and its promises are hollow?

When it comes to ensuring equitable opportunities for students across this country, our government has policy duplicity!

Our federal and state governments have failed to ensure that the patchwork quilt of laws and lawsuits actually guarantee equity of opportunity for every child.

Even the most successful equity lawsuit – the Abbott case in New Jersey – is now being undermined by Governor Chris Christie’s severe cutbacks in education funding.

NJEA [the New Jersey Education Association] fought hard to obtain the Abbott decision… And they won!

Oh, NJEA can tell you all about the lessons of Abbott – they’ll be the first ones to tell you that when you close opportunity gaps, you begin to close achievement gaps!

Greater investments in education, greater support to under-served students, greater results. It’s commonsense! It’s a no-brainer!

According to the renowned educational expert, Linda Darling-Hammond, we know that there are four main inequities that impact educational success: inequitable distribution of money to schools; inequitable access to a rich, high-quality, 21st century curriculum; inequitable distribution of high quality teachers and teaching; and childhood poverty that limits access to early learning, healthcare, and good nutrition.

These factors were reiterated this February by the Commission on Equity and Excellence.

Our president Dennis Van Roekel was privileged to receive an appointment to serve on this Commission. And for two years I watched Dennis and our staff member, Donna Harris-Aikens, struggle with fellow Commissioners about how to define and achieve the dual objectives of ensuring equity of opportunity on the one hand AND excellence in our public schools on the other.

It was our President who reminded the entire Commission about the impact that poverty has on student success. In fact, the very first sentence of the report—which sets the tone--is Dennis’s voice and I quote:

*“While some young Americans…are getting a truly world-class education, those who attend schools in high poverty neighborhoods are getting an education that more closely approximates schools in developing nations.”*

Well, that may seem obvious to us, but let me tell you, it was a fight to get the entire Commission to agree with that very basic truth.

In the end, this diverse group of academics, practitioners, and advocates all concluded what we already know:

Early childhood education matters!

Equitable school funding matters!

Equal access to quality educators matters!

Poverty and income inequality matter!

To me, the Commission report reflects the meaning of the word justice. It promotes both what is right and what is fair for students.

Excellence in our professions is what’s right for students. And equity of opportunity is what’s fair. That’s the definition of “education justice.”

As educators, we know firsthand that equal access alone doesn’t guarantee equity of opportunity. And we also know equal access doesn’t guarantee excellence.

To achieve both isn’t easy, nor is it cheap. And despite what many in the media and the so-called “reform” community say, the two are NOT mutually exclusive.

So my friends, if education justice is our goal, equity of opportunity alone is not enough. As Dennis so passionately described yesterday, it requires excellence as well.

NEA, we’ve never stopped believing in our responsibility to deliver excellence to our students. We’ve just been too afraid to claim the mantel of excellence as ours!

When it comes to excellence…We must define it. We must demand it. We must practice it. We must own it. And we must lead it!

We define it--like the Massachusetts Teachers’ Association defined what a great teacher evaluation system should look like.

We demand it--like our ESPs in LaPorte, Indiana who demanded monthly professional development to keep students safe.

We practice it--like our local in Denver, Colorado that has established a top-notch residency program, so new educators are prepared for the classroom.

We own it--like our local in Columbus, Ohio that established a nationally renowned peer assistance and review program to provide support and demand the best.

We lead it--like our members in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin that created a phenomenal mentoring program so that educators get the coaching they need to master their craft.

Excellence….every educator….everyday….for every student.

But sisters and brothers, our responsibility as professionals doesn’t stop there.

The hard edges of our economy and the absence of adequate protections for our kids has become a norm this country simply cannot afford.

The percentage of children living in low-income families has risen from 40% before the financial meltdown to 45% in 2012. Let me say that again, nearly half of America’s children are growing up in low-income families and 20 percent are living in deep poverty. In America, 42 percent of kids born into poverty stay in poverty.

The income gap in this country has never been wider, which means that the opportunity gap has never been more severe.

It’s immoral to sentence children to a lifetime of poverty. It contradicts our American values.

Those who favor market-based solutions to all of America’s problems seem comfortable accepting abject poverty and gross income inequality as normal byproducts of our economic system.

Case in point: I don’t see Michelle Rhee or the Walton family or the Koch Brothers rushing to the aid of poor American families to close the opportunity gaps in this country.

But sisters and brothers, we must keep the faith. As Dr. King once said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

So, every time there’s a fight about investments in education, we need to stand up for more funding AND fair funding. Every time there’s a fight about income inequality, we need to stand up and fight for our students AND their families. That’s our responsibility. That’s our calling.

I’ve seen so many of you answer that calling in so many ways--from individual acts of charity in school buildings to legislative victories that impact entire states.

When our members along the south Texas border set up a clothing closet of school uniforms for poor families, they raised their hands for education opportunity!

Texas, raise your hand!

When our ESP members in Knox County, Kentucky send home backpacks of food every night for their students, they raise their hands for education opportunity!

Kentucky, raise your hand!

When our members in California stood beside Governor Jerry Brown to pass one of the most historic school funding packages, they raised their hands for education opportunity!

California, raise your hand!

Now, I know that wasn’t easy. And my goodness it wasn’t cheap.

But NEA members, I see you turning the generosity and passion that’s in each of your hearts into collective action for your students. That’s the power of organizing! And organizing is what we must do!

But sisters and brothers, I believe we are defined as much by what we stand for as what we fight against.

And like our founding fathers, they declared their independence, they wrote their governing articles, and they adopted their Bill of Rights.

So, on this 4th of July, we must be courageous enough to declare our independence!

Independence from the ignorant politicians who can’t seem to understand that learning is more than testing!

Independence from those who equate testing with teaching!

And independence from those who can’t see that a student is more than a test score!

When our members in Seattle refused to administer a harmful test, they declared their independence!

We need to declare our independence from privateers who want to turn public education into another industry for profit! We want to democratize opportunity, not commoditize it!

So for all the “privateers” and “profiteers” who are peddling their false promises, you mark my words: there’s a rising tide of resistance out there.

Americans are smarter than you think--we see through your snake-oil sales pitch! And we’re going to organize, organize, organize to send you packing!

Sisters and brothers, public education is a public good that should be safe-guarded as a sacred trust.

The opportunity to receive a world-class education shouldn’t just exist in the same neighborhoods who already have it or for those who can buy it.

Opportunity is part of our social contract. And equal opportunity is the foundation of democracy. We need to demand that our lawmakers hold that ideal sacrosanct.

Look at Gov. Corbett in Pennsylvania. He made deep cuts in education funding, laid off thousands of educators, and watched some educators work for free in bankrupt school districts. Yet somehow he found the money to build a brand new prison!

Did he think we wouldn’t notice? Does he think families won’t care? I think Gov. Corbett needs a taste of education justice.

I am so tired of the false dichotomy that is perpetuated by the so-called “reformers” and the media. I’m tired of the same old question: is it poverty or is it teacher quality that makes the biggest difference in a student’s achievement? Is it about opportunities or is it about excellence?

Well ladies and gentlemen, here’s the answer: It’s both!

Friends, we can’t be afraid anymore. We can’t be afraid to call out bad actors and bad ideas. And we can’t be afraid to call each other out when we’re not doing whatever it takes.

The guiding light of our American self-governance is found in the articles of our Constitution. We revere them; we choose to abide by them.

Well NEA members, we too have articles. They are the articles of excellence found in our mission, vision, and core values. We must honor them and relentlessly pursue them.

And to those who doubt our sincerity, let me be clear about what we believe:

We believe in closing opportunity gaps AND excellence gaps.

We believe that educators should be of the highest quality. Period. From preK to higher ed--no exceptions.

We believe that accomplished teachers should define what quality teaching looks like and how it should be measured.

We believe that teachers should be evaluated using multiple measures, not a single test score.

We believe that education support professionals are every bit as much a contributor to student success as teachers.

We believe that every single educator must be culturally competent – understanding, respecting, and embracing every student’s unique and beautiful story.

I commend Dennis, Lily, and Becky for leading our professions. This union can and should become the place where education professionals look to improve their practice, their knowledge, and their skills. You are leading a movement that will harness the amazing talent and expertise of our own members to lift up their practice and lift up the hopes of our students.

But our declaration of independence and our articles of excellence are not complete without a Bill of Rights.

I agree with Peter Cookson. Students in America need their own Bill of Rights--a Bill of Rights that guarantees the right of every student to attend a well-funded, safe, 21st century school. One that honors each students’ differences and their individual needs. One that delivers an engaging, world-class curriculum through world-class instruction. One that fairly assesses each student’s learning and each educator’s performance. And one that is led by educational leaders who put students’ needs in the center of every decision.

The American family is made so much richer and vibrant when every child has a chance…when every family can enjoy the American Dream.

NEA, we help build those dreams…in our schools, on our buses, in our lecture halls.

We educate America!

We hold the keys to excellence and opportunity.

We hold the cradle of innovation and ingenuity in our hands.

They’re our students. They’re our future.

NEA, our country needs us. Our students need us.

On this 4th of July, let’s declare our independence!

Let’s organize for our students!

Let’s stand up for our professions!

Let’s work for education justice!

Thank you, NEA!