

The National Everything Association

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Each year for four full days, over 9,000 elected delegates to the National Education Association Representative Assembly meet, debate, and vote upon the union's business. The most important items on the agenda are either internal, such as whether to have a partnership with the American Federation of Teachers, or education-related, such as the union's policy on charter schools or standardized testing.

However, most of the delegates' time and energy is expended on other matters, either ceremonial or unrelated in a meaningful way to education. The process by which NEA allows new business items to be introduced all but assures that even the most hare-brained idea from the smallest faction of the assembly will get its moment in the convention spotlight. At the 2001 Representative Assembly in Los Angeles, delegates were discussing an amendment to the NEA legislative program that would have called for reinstatement of full citizenship rights for felons who have completed their sentences. A delegate from Illinois, speaking against the amendment, reminded his colleagues that "We're the National Education Association, not the National Everything Association." The amendment was referred back to NEA's legislative committee.

The vast majority of NEA delegates are sensible people, if slanted to the liberal-left, and vote down a number of these items every year. But a cleverly worded item, along with a speech on the floor that strikes the right chords, can put the weight of America's largest single union behind issues about which they may have only the slightest understanding. This is important for a couple of reasons. First, one of NEA's articles of faith is that non-educators are constantly telling teachers what to do, instead of relying on them to define best policies and practices. A March 1999 statement by Massachusetts Teachers Association President Stephen E. Gorrie is typical of this sentiment. "We must work together with a display of unity that declares, loudly and clearly, that *we*, the professional educators, know what is best for our students; that *we* know what is best for our schools and colleges; and, yes, that *we* know what is best for ourselves," he said.

Yet it is difficult to take this perfectly defensible stance seriously when the union positions itself on missile defense or beryllium emissions based on a 50-word rationale submitted by a school custodian, which has been seconded by a mere 50 of his or her colleagues. Where is the appeal to expertise here?

Second, while NEA expends most of its lobbying efforts and political endorsements on education issues, the people NEA helps elect to public office vote on all sorts of issues. It helps to know what NEA expects those office-holders to do when these non-related issues come up for a vote.

Observers tend to focus on NEA's resolutions when trying to discover where the union stands on a particular issue. The resolutions are NEA's statements of belief and are very useful, but they don't tell us anything about what actions they plan to take in the coming year or what issues they will support or oppose in Congress. A resolution might state that NEA supports a curriculum for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students, but it would contain no specific requirement for action on that belief. Resolutions are the union's philosophy, but its current agenda is contained in its legislative program and new business items.

The legislative program, for example, is where one can now find NEA's support for parents to opt-out of standardized tests. The exact language, passed by the delegates at the 2001 convention, reads: "NEA supports legislation allowing parents to opt their children out of all mandated standardized test, without penalties for students, parents, teachers, or schools."

NEA publishes its legislative program each year for delegate approval. The preamble states, in part, that the convention delegates, "through adoption of the Legislative Program, sets forth the federal legislative policies that facilitate accomplishment of the strategic objectives in pursuit of the Association's mission." These policies are divided into three categories. The first, NEA Legislative Initiatives, are policies "developed and initiated by NEA that require continuing high activity levels to accomplish the goal." This high-priority category contains only three issues: quality public schools, increased federal funding for education, and collective bargaining.

The second category, NEA Current Congressional Issues, are policies "requiring NEA, singly or through coalitions, to initiate intensive activity to advance NEA's objectives." There are a variety of topics in this category, some minimally connected to education. The third category, NEA Continuing Legislative Concerns, are policies "constantly monitored by NEA that require appropriate NEA activity when matters arise in the Congress."

Each category contains lists of issues that NEA supports or opposes. Excerpted below are a few policies that NEA supports, listed under NEA Current Congressional Issues:

- * "Federal requirements that manufacturers add a bittering agent to all poisonous household products"
- * "Extension of Daylight Savings Times until the first Sunday in November"
- * "A tax-supported, single-payer health care plan for all residents of the United States, its territories and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico"
- * "A comprehensive Medicare/Medicaid system with protected benefits, including prescription drug benefits and benefits for home health care, mental health services, and non-medical aid"
- * "Federal initiatives to deal with the growing national concern relating to stalking"
- * "Full equality and opportunity — economic and educational — for all, including to the addition of the

Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution”

- * “Reproductive freedom without governmental intervention”
- * “The use of affirmative action to redress historical patterns of discrimination”
- * “Federal initiatives to deal with the growing national concern relating to racial profiling”
- * “Recognition of the Native Hawaiians as an indigenous people who have a special relationship with the United States and a right to self-determination under the federal law”
- * “Legislation to acknowledge the violation of civil liberties imposed on over 600,000 Italian-born immigrants in the United States and their families by the United States government”
- * “Legislation calling for genetic non-discrimination in employee hiring and in the issuance of health insurance by employers and health benefit providers”
- * “A mutual, verifiable nuclear freeze with cessation of testing, production, and further deployment of nuclear delivery systems and other destabilizing systems”
- * “Reductions in the Social Security retirement age”
- * “A universal 24-hour voting period for all national elections”
- * “Full disclosure of all sources of political financing”
- * “Statehood for the District of Columbia”

Under NEA Continuing Legislative Concerns, the union also lists a number of other policies it supports, excerpted below:

- * “Legislative rather than regulatory determination of the process by which the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and any adjustments resulting from it are calculated”
- * “Funding for the National Endowment of the Arts”
- * “Adequate public financing for public broadcasting”
- * “A national holiday honoring Cesar Chavez”
- * “Development and implementation of a long-range national energy policy that reduces dependence on foreign sources of energy, emphasizes research on, development of, and rapid conversion to environmentally safe energy sources, and encourages conservation of current energy resources”

* “Federal regulation on the sale or distribution of games that have gratuitous violence as an integral part of the play”

* “Legislation to preserve and expand Native Hawaiian land ownership”

* “Total federal assumption of the cost and operation of welfare programs based on standards of human dignity”

NEA’s espousal of an extremely activist federal government places it solidly in concert with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. But the non-education new business items raised on the floor of the Representative Assembly tend to push the left-wing envelope. New business items, or NBIs, are different from resolutions in that they call for specific action by NEA, usually within a finite period of time. The new business items passed by the 2000 Representative Assembly required NEA to prepare and distribute gun control petitions; disseminate a domestic violence publication; call for the curtailment of beryllium emissions; denounce anabolic steroid use; advocate pension fund divestiture of tobacco companies; research working conditions and human rights in overseas apparel manufacturing; and push for an end to atrocities in Sudan.

NEA officers and staff studied campaign finance reform and HMO regulation. NEA President Bob Chase wrote a letter to the Boy Scouts of America, informing them that “NEA and its affiliates will work to insure that the public schools fully disassociate themselves from BSA and its message of exclusion and intolerance.” The union’s monthly publication, *NEA Today*, featured articles on Mayan schoolchildren in Chiapas, Mexico, “trafficking in persons,” affirmative action lawsuits, and the Garifuna people, in response to directives from the NEA Representative Assembly through new business items.

This year, the union will spend time and resources on similar issues. Convention delegates passed New Business Item 10, which says: “NEA opposes Bush administration plans to deploy a National Missile Defense system and will use its offices and publications to educate NEA members on this issue. NEA shall recommend that funding for the Missile Defense Shield be diverted to a fund to uplift low-performing public schools and close the achievement gap.”

NBI 15 reads, “NEA will research and review the free trade area of the Americas Treaty for its effects upon education and labor rights, and report back to the 2002 RA,” and NBI 57 says, “Through its publications, NEA will disseminate information about stem cell research, especially its value towards the eradication and/or relief from a multitude of medical conditions affecting millions worldwide.”

The debate on NBI 48 raged for over 30 minutes. It calls on NEA to take actions condemning the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, specifically to “educate our members on the crimes committed against the human rights of Afghan women and on Muslim religious groups in all avenues of NEA media and at appropriate NEA conferences.” Delegates discussed why the wording mentioned only Muslim religious groups by name, whether the delegates should be mandating content at NEA conferences, and even debated the proper spelling of “Taliban.”

A large number of non-education NBIs failed, but still ate up a great deal of time at the convention. Among these were:

* NBI 7. “President Chase will communicate with the International Olympic Committee to object to assignment of future Olympic Games to China, until China’s human and civil right violations cease. Furthermore, NEA will educate its membership on the issue through media such as *NEA Today* and the website.”

* NBI 21. “NEA will work with state and local affiliates to ensure proper voting machines, voter machine programs and practices have been installed and instituted in all 50 states.” The rationale for this NBI stated: “This will create a political environment that promotes student achievement thereby restoring public confidence in public education.”

* NBI 62. “The NEA shall publicize and seek donations for the Medical School Scholarship Program, initiated by the Congressional Black Caucus and administered by the inter-religious Foundation for Community Organization. This fund will offer 250 full scholarships for lower-income youth from the U.S. to attend medical school at the Latin American School of Medical Services in Havana, Cuba, and to later give services in their underserved communities.”

* NBI 74. “NEA shall use its offices and publications to educate NEA members about the U.S. Government’s policies and efforts to bring about a lasting and equitable peace in the Middle East.”

NEA has made numerous attempts over the years to speed up proceedings at the convention. Many of these attempts concentrate on reducing the number of non-education items on the agenda. Iowa State Education Association President Jolene Franken told her members, “I believe that the [Representative Assembly] spends too much time and energy dealing with social issues that have no bearing on our work in the classroom.” Indeed, one of the first items of business after this year’s convention ended was a meeting of NEA officials to brainstorm over ideas to streamline debate at future assemblies.

But efforts to do so failed this year. Delegates voted down two attempts to increase the number of petition signatures required to introduce a new business item. The proposed increases from 50 to 250, or even 200, failed by large margins.

An examination of new business items over the past two years indicates NEA’s problem with overlong conventions, as well as much of its problem with business unrelated to education, centers on one place -- California. The California Teachers Association is the largest of NEA’s state affiliates, and its delegates routinely make up 11 to 12 percent of the total Representative Assembly. But last year, 24 of the 77 new business items considered by delegates came from California -- a total of 31.2 percent. This year, the percentage was even higher. Twenty-nine of 84 new business items came from California -- a total of 34.5 percent. A large number of these were non-education items.

NEA’s claim to the mantle of “professional association” flies in the face of their non-education stances. Where do electrical engineers stand on bilingual education? Are the trial lawyers opposed to

standardized testing? Are doctors and nurses hooked on phonics? No one knows because these professionals rarely involve themselves in issues outside their fields. Teacher associations should follow that lead, or embrace what they are rapidly becoming: full-fledged political parties.

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