

The
Truth
About NEA

The NEA Response to its Critics

*Formerly known as
Deceptions by the Radical Right against the
National Education Association*



Great Public Schools for Every Child

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National Education Association of the United States

Introduction

The National Education Association (NEA) is the nation's leading advocate for children and public education. It is the largest and most diverse educational organization in the world. Association members embrace a wide range of religious, political, and philosophical beliefs. Enriched by 2.7 million members, 53 state affiliates, and more than 14,000 local affiliates, NEA has been able to develop a strong, united organization. It's an inspiring example of what happens when schools, educators, parents, and communities join forces to provide great public schools for all students.

NEA, founded in 1857, is proud of its long record of accomplishment. The Association has been a positive force for innovation—and a large target for those whose views differ substantially from our own. By advocating effectively and unceasingly for public education, NEA has thwarted some agendas and stepped on the toes of some groups trying to dismantle public education. These attacks against an organization of its size and scope are not surprising.

NEA has re-written this booklet (formerly called *Deceptions by the Radical Right against the National Education Association*) to provide its members and potential members with timely, well-thought-out responses to the most frequent criticisms leveled at NEA. It's a way of ensuring that despite all the allegations, all the untruths, NEA always has and always will speak for itself.



The Truth | About NEA

NEA's Response to its Critics

Deception 1: NEA wants to keep parents and communities out of schools. The association does not believe in family values.

Truth: NEA encourages parental and community involvement in public schools.

NEA believes education is a team effort that should take place in the home and in the classroom. The Association knows children perform better in school when they receive the help they need from home. NEA encourages parents to communicate regularly with their children's teachers, stay informed about their children's progress, and help shape school policy.

NEA works closely with a number of parent organizations, including the National PTA and the National Coalition for Parental Involvement in Education, that are diligent about building strong family-school-community partnerships. The Association has distributed hundreds of publications on the importance of these alliances and the need for innovative programs to support them. NEA also co-sponsors American Education Week with the National PTA, the American Legion, and the U.S. Department of Education. This event celebrates educators and the work they do in the classroom.

NEA also welcomes alliances with businesses and organizations that support public education.

Deception 2: NEA opposes parental choice and is out to destroy charter, private, and parochial schools.

Truth: NEA supports schools that are held to the same standards of accountability and access as traditional public schools.

NEA believes in strengthening the nation's public schools rather than expending money for alternatives. So do 75 percent of the Americans surveyed in a recent *Phi Delta Kappan* poll. The Association also believes that parents should be free to choose, supplement, or substitute education in privately supported, nonpublic schools—but at their own expense. Public funding should only be used to support public schools.

NEA opposes any federal legislation, laws, or regulations that provide funds, goods, or services to sectarian schools that are not accountable to public authorities or bound by the law.

Like most Americans, NEA opposes tax credits, tuition vouchers, and other schemes that divert public funds to private schools. Voucher initiatives have appeared on state ballots seven times since 1972 and have been voted down each time.

NEA supports charter schools that have the same standards of access and accountability as other public schools. But, according to a number of national studies, students attending many charter schools face less experienced teachers and get weaker instructional support. A number of charter schools have had serious legal problems, poor academic track records, and problems staying open.

Deception 3: NEA encourages curriculum that promotes homosexuality and supports hiring preferences for homosexual teachers.

Truth: NEA believes that schools should be safe for all students and teachers regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The Association opposes discrimination against any group of students or employees.

No school attempts to “teach” students to become gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT). The Association believes schools should raise awareness of homophobia and that they should intervene when GLBT students are harassed. Across the nation, GLBT students experience higher rates of verbal and physical abuse that affect their health, school attendance and participation, and academic achievement. The Association believes school personnel should receive appropriate training and resource materials regarding GLBT youth in order to create and maintain a learning environment that’s free of harassment and discrimination. This can be done by raising awareness of anti-GLBT bias in age-appropriate ways and by teaching students to respect their differences.

Protecting employees from discrimination and favoring employees in hiring are completely different issues. While NEA does not support the preferential treatment of GLBT employees or any group of employees in hiring, promotion, or dismissal, the Association does support policies that also protect employees from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. NEA also believes that schools should create work environments that are free of anti-GLBT harassment and abuse.

Deception 4: NEA encourages students to be sexually active.

Truth: NEA does not support sex education programs that encourage student sexual activity. Instead, the Association supports comprehensive health education, including sex education, as long as these programs include parental involvement and are sensitive to community values. These programs must be age appropriate and respect the differences of others. The Association supports family planning counseling and access to birth control methods with instruction in their use as long as these services are deemed appropriate by local choice.

Deception 5: NEA favors banning all guns and disarming citizens.

Truth: NEA supports common sense limits on the use and distribution of certain kinds of guns—including handguns and semiautomatic rifles.

NEA isn't trying to ban all guns nor is it trying to stop recreational hunting by responsible adults. NEA cares deeply about student safety and supports policies and programs that protect students from weapons and violence. Through its Gun Safety Campaign, NEA is trying to reduce the incidence of gun violence and prevent tragedies like the ones that took place on school premises in Littleton, CO; West Paducah, KY.; Moses Lake, WA; Pearl, MS; and Jonesboro, AR; when children used guns to kill other students and teachers.

Each day in the U.S., eight children die from gun violence and at least 35 suffer from firearms-related injuries. NEA does not believe the public

should be able to purchase automatic and semiautomatic paramilitary weapons and seeks to control the sale of low-cost handguns used specifically to injure and kill. Limiting access to weapons is only part of a good child safety strategy; communicating with parents and collaborating with community groups and law enforcement agencies will also help keep kids and schools safe.

Deception 6: NEA supports abortion.

Truth: NEA supports reproductive freedom without government intervention.

NEA does not have a pro-abortion policy. Period. Yet its stance on this issue is often misinterpreted and misunderstood. NEA's policy statement reads: "The National Education Association supports family planning, including the right to reproductive freedom." What this means is that NEA supports the current protections guaranteed under the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision. This decision allows women to decide for themselves if they should have children—or not have children—and protects the constitutional rights of all women, whether they are pro-choice or anti-abortion.

Throughout the years, NEA has defended a number of members who were harassed or terminated because they made the decision to have children—against the will of school authorities. One case involved a woman who became pregnant after being raped. She decided to have her child even though school administrators threatened to fire her. Other cases defended by NEA involved unmarried, pregnant women who chose to keep their children.

Here's an interesting fact: While NEA has spent tens of thousands of dollars defending the rights

of its members to choose childbirth over abortion, it has not spent one penny under its legal services program defending their right to have an abortion.

Deception 7: NEA is anti-religious and opposes voluntary school prayer.

Truth: NEA does not believe that schools should be “religion-free zones” and fully supports the broad religious freedoms currently enjoyed by students who attend public school, including the right to voluntary school prayer.

NEA has fought hard to clarify the role of religion in public education. During a recent legal challenge that sought to prevent students from reciting the pledge of allegiance, NEA filed an *amicus* brief in December 2003 urging the U.S. Supreme Court to uphold the pledge in its current form and keep the words “under God” intact. NEA also supports the broad freedoms that allow students attending school to pray individually or in groups, discuss their religious views with willing listeners in nondisruptive ways, read the Bible or other religious material, and say grace before meals. In schools that allow extracurricular activities, NEA also believes students should be able to distribute religious material to their schoolmates and have the same access to public school facilities as other student groups.

NEA supports current law that schools can not officially sponsor or promote sectarian activities and teachers can not use their classrooms to proselytize or impose their personal religious beliefs.

While NEA agrees the study of religion has a broad impact on society and should be included

in public school curriculum, the Association cautions that the approach used should be academic, not devotional. Through its partnership with the National Council of Churches, NEA will continue to explore ways in which the faith-based community and the education community can join together to support high quality public education for all.

Deception 8: NEA members who become involved in politics are unprofessional.

Truth: NEA encourages its members to become effective advocates for students by participating in politics.

Politics influence all aspects of education—school budgets, curriculum and textbook content, class size, and other pressing educational concerns. Elected and appointed officials set the budgets, make the policies, and design the programs for education at all levels. They also vote on the collective bargaining agreements that determine compensation and working conditions for educators nationwide.

Teachers and education support professionals are front-line soldiers in the battle for quality public education and education reform. They know first-hand about the challenges faced by students and educators. Getting involved in politics gives them a voice in matters that affect children, public education, and public education employees. NEA and its affiliates communicate with members about candidates and encourage them to actively campaign for issues that affect or threaten public education. Considering what's at stake, school employees can't afford not to be politically active.

Deception 9: NEA policy is determined by a small clique of union leaders who are far to the left of the Association's membership-at-large.

Truth: NEA policy is determined by more than 9,000 members at the annual Representative Assembly.

NEA policy is determined by its Representative Assembly (RA). The Association's 2.7 million members select the RA delegates who meet each year (the first week in July) to set policy, decide on a budget, elect officers, and propose new business for NEA. The RA is the largest democratic deliberative body of its kind in the world and boasts more delegates than the Republican and Democratic conventions combined. When NEA's Board of Directors and the Association's Executive Committee act, they're enforcing the policies approved by the RA. NEA policy is neither to the left or right of its membership. Members determine NEA policy.

Deception 10: Educators are forced to join NEA.

Truth: Membership in NEA is entirely voluntary. No one can be forced to join.

When a union becomes the exclusive bargaining representative for a group of employees, it is required by law to represent all those employees, regardless of whether they are members of the union or not. In some states, employers and employees are allowed to negotiate agency shop provisions in their contracts. These agreements, upheld by the courts for many decades, ensure that all employees in a bargaining unit help pay for the benefits they receive. This means that employees who don't join the Association must still pay an agency fee that covers the costs of activities related to collective bargaining as well as contract administration and enforcement.

Deception 11: NEA encourages teachers to go out on strike.

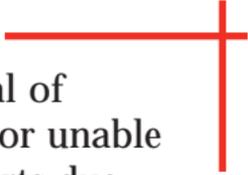
Truth: The decision to strike can only be made by education employees in local affiliates who feel they have exhausted all other efforts to resolve their differences with school administrators.

NEA has never called a teacher strike. The Association advocates for and supports its members when they are forced to go out on strike. And NEA views collective bargaining as an invaluable democratic tool for solving problems, managing resources, dealing with salary and other compensation issues, and setting clear expectations for staff and administrators. By advocating for better salaries and working conditions through collective bargaining, NEA's affiliates help school districts and colleges attract and retain qualified staff and faculty. Collective bargaining has also been used to lower class size, allow time for educators to work collaboratively with each other, and help them expand their knowledge and skills.

Deception 12: NEA protects incompetent teachers.

Truth: NEA wants a qualified teacher in every classroom.

A quality education begins with a qualified teacher in every classroom. Throughout its history, the Association has been an advocate for improving the teaching and training methods that ensure prospective teachers have the skills and knowledge they need to be effective. NEA has supported strong certification and state licensure requirements, mentoring programs linking new and experienced teachers, and continuing education and professional development for existing teachers.



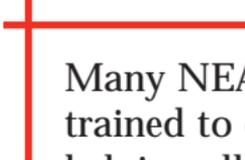
All tenure laws provide for the removal of ineffective teachers who are unwilling or unable to teach. While the Association supports due process in cases involving the dismissal, transfer, or demotion of employees, it also promotes the use of peer assistance and mentoring programs to help retain promising teachers and maintain high standards of teaching.

NEA is opposed to efforts to de-regulate and de-skill the teaching profession such as the “Passport to Teaching” offered by the American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE). The ABCTE program allows candidates who have not worked with young people and who have no teacher preparation experience to receive a license that allows them to teach. Instead, NEA supports comprehensive state licensing requirements for prospective teachers that includes high-quality preparations and believes that all teacher preparation institutions should earn accreditation from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Excellence (NCATE). NEA further supports voluntary, advanced certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) that encourages teachers with at least three years of classroom experience to reflect on what techniques work, how they can improve, and how they can improve student achievement.

Deception 13: NEA is against the use of phonics.

Truth: NEA believes there is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning.

It makes sense to consider scientific research when making decisions about curriculum and instruction. But NEA is concerned that government policymakers exercise too much control over the techniques educators are allowed to use.



Many NEA members are reading specialists, well trained to determine which methods to use in helping all children become proficient readers. The Association is concerned that government-approved programs, such as Reading First and Early Reading First, place too much emphasis on phonics exclusively and the use of highly scripted programs that prevent teachers from making informed decisions about what works best for individual students. NEA supports reading programs that allow educators to use a wide range of tools and materials to meet individual students' needs.

Deception 14: NEA is more concerned about teachers than kids.

Truth: NEA exists to improve the quality of public education and serve the needs of its members.

Helping students and helping teachers go hand-in-hand. The Association knows that the quality of education and teachers' working conditions are linked. NEA seeks to enhance the professionalism of education employees by providing them with opportunities to develop their skills and improve their teaching techniques. NEA also advocates for the kind of employment rights, economic benefits, and working conditions that they as professionals deserve.

NEA advocates for qualified teachers in every classroom, improving reading skills, promoting school construction and modernization, building bipartisan support for public education, and advocating for safe and orderly schools.

Deception 15: NEA opposes teacher competency testing.

Truth: NEA supports the fair and unbiased testing of all applicants entering the teaching profession. It also supports the ongoing assessment of all teachers through a comprehensive evaluation process.

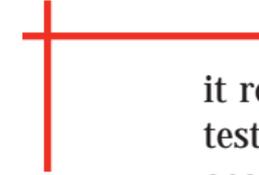
NEA is not opposed to testing entry-level teachers to ensure their competency in both content and teaching skills. The ability to pass a test should be only one criteria for entering the teaching profession.

But it is unfair and shortsighted to use a written test as a means of determining a veteran teacher's competency. No other profession tests practitioners after they have been hired.

NEA believes that the best tools for ensuring a qualified teacher in every classroom are better teacher preparation programs, tighter enforcement of licensing requirements, mentoring, performance-based evaluations, professional development programs, and adequate compensation. Teachers also need time during the regular workday to study, research, reflect, and collaborate with colleagues.

Deception 16: NEA fights measures that hold schools accountable for how well students learn and achieve. It is the greatest stumbling block to the education reform movement.

Truth: NEA supports the goals of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act)—high standards and high expectations for every student and educator. But



it rejects ESEA's notion that high-stakes testing is the only adequate measure of academic success and opposes the law's punitive impact on Title I schools and students who need the most help.

Education employees know what really works for all children: smaller classes, teacher training, updated textbooks and materials, increased parental involvement, and early childhood and after school programs. The Association's Priority Schools Initiative is a proven model for transforming low-performing schools. NEA supports incentives for teachers to work in high priority schools as well as supporting the advanced teacher training program offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

NEA and its affiliates have always supported high standards and strong accountability at the local, state, and national levels.

Deception 17: NEA's opposition to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act, shows its lack of commitment to closing the achievement gap. This is a slap in the face for minority students.

Truth: NEA is deeply concerned about closing the achievement gaps in education.

NEA believes the future of public education is linked to the achievement levels of all students—regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, language, or socio-economic status. Yet 50 years after the Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal public education for minority students is unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education*), learning disparities based on race and income still plague



our nation's schools. The Association believes the current gaps in achievement shown by certain groups are totally unacceptable, especially in a country that has the intellectual and financial resources to ensure equality and equity for all students.

NEA feels it has a moral imperative to raise achievement levels but realizes this won't happen by relying on a law whose methods of evaluation are biased and unfair. By using high-stakes tests to measure student achievement, ESEA will divert money from schools that are overwhelmingly minority—and continue to hurt students who already are lagging behind.

Closing the achievement gaps will require greater parental and community involvement and a commitment to equitable and adequate funding for programs that work.

The best way to close the achievement gaps is to improve teacher quality, recruit, retain, and train more teachers and paraeducators, and push for smaller class sizes, up-to-date books and materials, and adequate and equitable funding.

Deception 18: NEA encourages immorality among students by opposing the censorship of “offensive” books and materials.

Truth: NEA supports efforts to teach critical thinking skills to our nation's students.

NEA believes the classroom is an appropriate place to discuss new information and varying viewpoints and that educators should be allowed to exercise their professional judgment in choosing instructional materials educationally suitable for all students. The Association believes censoring library books and textbooks will not help prepare students for life in the real world.

NEA recognizes that some materials are not suitable for some students and supports local control with parental involvement to set standards for books and materials used in a school district.

Deception 19: NEA distributes millions of dollars in mandatory dues payments to candidates and political parties—without the consent of its members.

Truth: The money NEA uses to support political candidates comes from a separate, segregated voluntary campaign fund.

Federal law prohibits NEA from using dues money to make contributions to federal candidates or political parties. Instead, the money comes from the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education. This special fund consists of voluntary contributions from NEA members, not membership dues.

Deception 20: NEA is committed to electing only Democrats to public office.

Truth: NEA recommends that its members support pro-education candidates without regard to their political affiliation.

NEA's recommendations are based solely on a candidate's support of issues that are important to NEA members and students. These issues include opposing private school vouchers, respecting teachers as professionals, and supporting quality education programs. NEA does not consider a candidate's political party when making these recommendations and has recommended Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike.

Have you ever been grilled about the state of public education? Have you wished you had the data to explain why education costs so much? Have you struggled to explain to a colleague why it's important to join the Association? Well, you're not alone.

These are just a few of the questions that educators like you face every day. You've learned "the truth about NEA." Now with *Q&A: The Most Provocative Questions Asked of Education Professionals Today and How to Answer Them*, you have the answers to the most commonly asked "tough" questions right at your fingertips.

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