

An Institution at Risk

**An External Communications Review
of the National Education Association**

**Submitted by
The Kamber Group
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PREFACE

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty, and so bear ourselves that if the [NEA and the American system of public education] last for a thousand years,[people] will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'

These words, adapted from Winston Churchill's speech before the Battle of Britain, should be embraced by the National Education Association as it prepares to save public education. Because the future of both institutions are every bit as much at risk as Britain's was in 1940. And saving them will require the same courage, commitment and tenacity.

For the past 13 years since release of *A Nation at Risk*, the NEA and our public education system have come under increasing and unrelenting attack. The assault has been led by anti-government ideologues who believe the private sector does everything better, by anti-labor zealots who jump on every opportunity to bash unions, by CEOs who seek profits from educating our children, and by religious extremists who equate public education with Satan.

But it's too easy to dismiss the attacks as the rantings of extremists. Many of their arguments are now embraced by those in the mainstream. From the attacks of Bob Dole (by way of Lamar Alexander and Bill Bennett) to the series of seminal stories in *U.S. News & World Report* to one of America's most influential columnists (and hardly a conservative), David Broder, the NEA is now painted as the number one obstacle to better public schools.

In the face of these constant assaults - so absurd on the face of it - NEA first assumed that a non-response would make them go away. When this didn't happen, the NEA's discomfort with certain public forums kept it at a low level of visibility. When NEA did respond, it was frequently rambling and verbose, speaking in jargon and generalities, overly sensitive to internal political considerations, often negative, and lacking a succinct message.

NEA now recognizes the state it is in. Which is why it decided to authorize an outside review of the Association's external communications efforts.

Over the past three months, The Kamber Group interviewed 42 leaders and staff of NEA and its state affiliates, reviewed 32 months of print and electronic news clips, and analyzed boxes of NEA print and video materials, internal and external, including advertising. What we found is an organization that wants dramatic change and has made some important steps in that direction, but has not yet found the key to going all the way. Universally, the people we interviewed said the very existence of NEA and public education as we know them is at risk, but there is continued frustration about how to meet this imposing challenge.

What NEA faces now is a crisis. But one cannot handle a crisis in a business-as-usual mode. And despite its best intentions, the NEA continues to operate in a business-as-usual mode.

While the NEA has a surfeit of talented, committed people who work hard to do the right thing, there is an internal political environment which discourages risk-taking. It has a bureaucratic system of decision-making that involves too many "cooks" and takes too long. Ironically, it also has an insufficiently bureaucratic mode of operations in which individual departments sometimes do their *own* thing independent of one another, what the leadership wants, and how the NEA should appear to the outside world. With redeployment, there has already been a significant effort to break down the walls and change how the Association operates. It has met with some initial success, though some apparent confusion as well. But it has not yet turned the NEA direction into the focus needed to succeed in a crisis.

To survive, much less to prevail over its critics, the NEA must shift to a crisis mode of operations.

There is a crisis, some say a war, over the future of public education. And the NEA must continue to change its entire organizational culture - how it operates, what it says, who it puts forward, where it places its resources, when it acts - until this single, clear, overriding focus pervades every nook and cranny of its bureaucracy, every state affiliate and every local association.

The NEA needs a focused plan. A clear chain of command, with complete accountability for performance. A mindset that liberates the Association's talented staff from the constraints of a comfortable 8:30-4:30 job in pursuit of a larger *cause*. An embrace of the philosophy that "you take a risk or you don't exist." And a greater clarity of purpose.

In meeting this challenge, the NEA needs to accomplish these objectives:

- * Establish itself as *the* champion of public education through a new initiative to produce *better teachers, better students, better public schools*, and a call for all Americans to join in the challenge.
- * Stake out a clear risk through a crisis strategy that seeks to win not by silencing the opposition, but by co-opting the other side's turf so the NEA can direct reform discussions rather than having them dictated to it. This will require at least two or three substantive measures the NEA should adopt, or call for, to improve public schools (for example, standards for teachers, standards for students, Association accountability for teaching quality).
- * Use NEA's strongest assets - put teachers front and center - and pull in allies to make the Association's case and work to protect public education.

As a focal point both for making needed internal changes and for redefining NEA to the world, we recommend adoption of single overriding campaign for the next two years at a minimum, which we have given the working title of "better teachers, better students, better public schools."

We believe that this campaign will provide the impetus necessary to adopt a focused, crisis-oriented mode of operations. It will provide the impetus for making needed changes in the Association. It will be the means of shifting NEA's approach from that of an industrial union to one that embraces attributes of craft unionism, in which ensuring *quality workers* is just as important as raising wages and benefits at the bargaining table. It will provide the shock necessary to force everyone from cynical members of the press to the general public to take a second look at the organization. And it will push NEA out front in the education debate.

The campaign should be launched in a speech by President Chase in which he acknowledges the crisis, says some things for their shock value to open up the audience's minds (e.g., there are bad teachers and our job is to make them good or show the way to another career), and then details the Association's substantive programs to improve public schools - those already in existence and those that will be expanded or launched in the months ahead.

It should be supplemented by a full-court press blitz, television advertising, and a host of other outreach efforts. An "education summit" in the spring will provide further substance to this effort. To maintain the focus, third party coalitions must be formed to fight the NEA's battles on issues that would divert attention from the campaign's message (e.g., vouchers). Then, over the course of the year, there should be a roll-out of new NEA programs and initiatives that are real, designed to produce measurable results, and crafted to allay the still-lingering skepticism of so many of NEA's external audiences.

In this report we have attempted to address every single aspect of our review. We believe these are important and should be reviewed thoroughly by the NEA. But like the NEA itself has sometimes operated, we don't want the central message lost in the details. Which is why if there is one thing the Association takes away from this review, we believe it should be this:

*Public education, and the NEA, are in a state of crisis.
And only a focused, crisis-oriented mode of operations will suffice.*

Given the changes underway over the last year, this report does not suggest a radical shift - just swifter and greater movement in the same direction. Throughout its history, the NEA has adapted to the challenges facing it, from its founding days as a professional organization through the movement to collective bargaining. Today, the challenge requires another adaptation of its role. If NEA does so, then its best years will still lie ahead. And it will truly be the Association's finest hour.

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I. THE JOURNEY

Throughout its history, the National Education Association (NEA) has demonstrated a unique and remarkable ability to adapt to changing times and to grow with the evolving needs of its members. This is perhaps the number one reason for its singular success in empowering teachers and education support personnel, and protecting the American system of public education. But today, all of this is in question.

From its founding in 1857 until the 1960s, the NEA was primarily a professional association. In the words of more than one person The Kamber Group (TKG) interviewed for this report, it was "*a tea and crumpets organization.*"

But then came two largely concurrent transformative developments: the ability to collectively bargain on behalf of public employees and an influx of men into the teaching profession during the Vietnam War. And so the NEA took on the role of labor union - and in keeping with the philosophy and mind set of many of the newer members, adopted more an "industrial union" model in which increasing wages and benefits became the primary objective at the bargaining table.

One critic of the NEA, *Forbes* magazine, charged that this transformation was enhanced by a unique relationship of "the natural state of monopoly of the labor force" that occurs when a union is present and the monopoly of the state as an employer.¹ We believe it was more a function of the needs of educational employees, their treatment by school boards, and the NEA's effectiveness in organizing, bargaining and serving the members. Regardless, this development led both to the unprecedented growth and strengthening of the Association and made it more of a lightning rod for controversy.

This, combined with the election of Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976 and the creation of the Department of Education, established what many might call the heyday of the NEA.

All in all, real growth in power and influence for NEA, and the other teachers' union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), occurred without major complications until 1983 and the issuance of *A Nation at Risk*. This seminal report appeared as the Reagan revolution was flexing its might and also as members of the "religious right" began their movement into state legislatures, school boards and even the national dialogue of our government's policies and actions. Shortly thereafter, in 1985, one of their champions, William Bennett, was appointed secretary of education - and as he has increased his national prominence over the past dozen years, he has been an unrelenting and strident, albeit effective, adversary of the NEA.

¹ Peter Brimelow and Leslie Spencer, "The National Extortion Association?," *Forbes*, June 7, 1993.

At the same time, two interrelated phenomena emerged that caused additional complications - the spread of anti-government ideological zealotry, and the societal infection of anti-incumbency fever.

The truly vicious anti-Washington rhetoric brought proudly to the bully pulpit by Ronald Reagan in 1980 only grew during his term in office - and, unfortunately, beyond - and began to threaten the hope for civilized debate about government and societal reform. This is important to the NEA because education must and will always be front and center of any debate about the role of government and the future of our nation - both nationally and at the state and local levels. Opponents of public education saw their opportunity and seized it - perhaps not in an entirely orchestrated manner - but with some consistency and some real impact.

Indeed, what happened during the Reagan presidency and has expanded in the eight years since he left office is that anti-government rhetoric - which one focused primarily on government's role in regulating the economy and redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor - spread to all functions. In the past, even the most radical right-wingers rarely tread too deeply on the once-hallowed ground of public education. No longer. Inexorably, the notion that the private sector can do anything better than the public sector was applied to education. And like many things considered politically sacrosanct as recently as 18 years ago - the social safety net, civil rights laws, Medicare, Social Security - the future of public education is in question.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, anti-incumbency fever grew - interestingly, both as a result and as a cause of anti-government ideology.

NEA opponents knew what the rest of us know all too well. Hostility to incumbent office holders was affecting the country's feelings about almost anything that came out of Washington - particularly if it was perceived as large, well-financed and bureaucratic - a triad of qualities that critics were more and more often trying to attach to the NEA.

Fueling the fire, this era brought - and is still bringing - the American public a vastly changing economy shifting away from a traditional manufacturing base toward a new world/idea/information/service economy. This had several effects:

- * A growing sense of job and life insecurity;
- * Greater displacement of lower-skilled workers which led to greater poverty and stress that has, in turn, made itself felt in the public school system; and
- * With changing job skills needed, there will always be some lag time in our educational system's ability to meeting these demands, and that gave rise to business' and politicians' cries that public education was failing the workplace of the 21st century.

On this fertile ground, the Bill Bennetts and Beverly LaHays of the world began to find a home. Their own political ascendancy and fundraising base has at times been intimately tied to bashing the NEA. This in and of itself would not be as great of concern had it not been for the political, social and media environment that existed then - and still largely does today.

This combination of factors is what allowed the voucher battles of California and dozens of other states, the parental rights battles of Arizona, and the fights with Governors Engler, Thompson and others to take hold.

All of this set the stage for August 1996 and Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole's live, prime-time, network-broadcast assault on "teachers' unions" and the NEA during his acceptance speech. Perhaps no development has been more defining of the NEA's evolution - and its challenges - than that 15-second moment.

Regardless of whether it was wise or unwise for Dole to take that political gamble, it represented something significant - something that had been building in the states for some time. It was a belief that the NEA could be vilified and defined by myth and stereotype because segments of the public viewed the Association as a heavy-handed, selfish Washington special interest group that is the primary obstacle to needed education reform - and recent history had shown an ability to paint the organization into this absurd corner.

This was because during this time, the NEA was taking an unusually low profile, a position taken for understandable reasons but that unfortunately, allowed others to define the NEA for it and set the terms of the education debate. The result became an impression by some in the states and in Washington that the NEA was missing from the debate during this period. It also had the effect of pushing the press more into the arms of longtime AFT President Albert Shanker, who positioned his union as an advocate for education reform.

Thus, from the late '80s to the present day, some mainstream press, such as *U.S. News & World Report* and *Forbes* joined in the direct attack on NEA while, even more insidiously, other press let myths and misconceptions go as fact. National press began to actively promote the idea that American public education was broken and that we were falling woefully behind other western nations. This idea soon found its way into local press coverage. And when it was contradicted by the fact that local schools were doing well, local media explained it away by feeding the notion that "even if we're OK, everyone else is going to hell in a handbasket."

We saw the effects of this phenomenon in national polling data which demonstrated the average American's higher rating of their own local school system when compared to everyone else.² (This is analogous to polls showing that most voters like their own U.S. representative while believing that Congress is largely populated by buffoons and scoundrels.) This will

² Margaret Loftus and David Whitman, "I'm OK, You're Not," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 10, 1996.

become problematic in our message recommendations because, as the NEA's own pollster said, Americans are not interested in helping to improve public education as a whole if they believe that it is at the expense of their own local schools.³

Also during this period, the NEA was rightly focusing on rebuilding its internal communications operations, and Bill Martin was brought in from Ohio to put this together. The 20 state communications directors we interviewed had high praise for the restoration of the NEA Communication Department's role as an aid and partner in their work with the press., the public and members. In particular, they complemented the efforts of Martin, Ann Kurzius and Kathleen Lyons for providing them with real-time information and important advance information before studies, attacks or other challenging things actually occurred.

This illustrates one of the complications facing the NEA - it must serve so many different functions and roles, not all of them complementary, that its ability to present a unified face and message to the outside world has been compromised. First and foremost, of course, the NEA must advocate for its members, but since its members are responsible for educating most of America's children, it must also be a force for good in public education. It is a "bottom-up" organization which, to be effective in today's world, must make swift decisions and function like a finely-tuned clock. The challenge and expense of communicating with 2.2 million members sometimes conflicts with the need to communicate with 250 million Americans.

And perhaps most notably, there is the inevitable tension between its role as a union - concerned with wages and benefits - and a professional association dedicated to the improvement of teaching. This became a very noticeable issue in the focus group material we reviewed and in numerous interviews. There appears to be a sizable number of new or potential members of NEA who want to hear what the organization has to offer in terms of professional development, who are less concerned with traditional collective bargaining issues, and do not believe it is a player in terms of ensuring quality public education.

It was at this point in time that the NEA began to discuss a communications review with TKG, and asked us to examine the Association's efforts and operations "with an eye toward recommendations and/or assistance that will make the NEA more proactive, assertive, creative, and successful in positioning itself as a positive influence on education reform."

Finally, we arrive at the fall of 1996, when we began to work on this report. The NEA had begun a new period of leadership with the election of a new president. He felt that the Bob Dole attacks could not go unanswered and believes the organization must plunge into the waters of the education reform debate. President Chase believes the very notion of public education as we know it is under attack and, taken to its logical conclusion, that means the

³ Feldman Group Inc., "Public Schools in a Time of Change," May, 1994.

very nature/existence of the NEA is being challenged. This point of view was shared - indeed, usually volunteered - by most of the NEA leaders and staff whom we interviewed.

As stated in the preface, we believe there is a war over public education raging in America. The question is: Can the NEA continue its tradition of adapting to any and all new realities and challenges it faces? It is our hope that this report assists the NEA in this essential process and helps lead to a new and shining era for this vital institution.

II. METHODOLOGY

SUMMARY: Upon commencement of the communications review, TKG met with several members of the NEA staff to discuss project objectives and gather background information about NEA communications. The remainder of the communications review consisted of multi-level interviews, comprehensive media analysis and a thorough material review as detailed on the following pages.

A. Interviews

An important, hands-on aspect of the communications review included interviews focusing on NEA's external communications with 42 individuals associated with NEA. Specifically, TKG conducted interviews with:

- * 8 members of the NEA communications and government relations staffs;
- * 20 communications/executive directors from state affiliates;
- * All 6 members of the Executive Committee who are not officers;
- * 5 NEA executive staff members; and
- * 3 NEA officers.

These interviews were wide-ranging, freewheeling and frank. To ensure that interviewees would be comfortable expressing their true opinions, they were held in confidentiality; any quotes or references are neither listed with the interviewee's name attached nor in such a way that the person's identity would be apparent.

We were impressed with the exceptionally high level of cooperation and openness we received in the interviews. And while there were certainly differences of opinion, we were surprised by the degree to which most interviewees agree about the challenges facing the NEA and the direction it must move in to succeed. To a very large extent, the interviews have helped shape our analysis and recommendations.

B. Press Analysis

Due to NEA's stature, the media are a critical aspect of NEA's external communications - indeed, they are the primary conduit through which the Association relates to the outside world. Consequently, TKG examined NEA's relationship with the media from two points of view: what the NEA provides the media in the form of press releases, issues and spokespeople; and what the media report, or don't report, about the NEA and education issues in general. The final press analysis was conducted by analyzing:

- * More than 6,000 articles, representing 32 months of education-related news clips (dating from July 1993 to the present, with a few months in between missing);
- * Recent issues of *Education Week*;
- * Current wire clips;
- * Broadcast television interviews with President Chase in 1996 and other broadcast segments; and
- * Press releases (dating from August 1995 to November 1996).

While overwhelming in volume, a number of common themes quickly emerged from these materials, which are reflected in the sections which follow.

C. Advertising

Since advertising is also a vital aspect of external communications - the one way the NEA can be sure its messages reach the public in an unfiltered form - TKG reviewed:

- * More than a dozen NEA co-op television ads, reflecting the diversity of ways in which state affiliates tailor the spots to meet their own needs;
- * State affiliates television and radio ads;
- * Government relations issue- and campaign-related television spots;
- * Print ads; and
- * NEA advertorials under the byline of both Presidents Geiger and Chase.

In addition to looking at the creative design and substantive content of the ads in the context of where they fit into the NEA's overall communications objectives, we also reviewed budget and placement to analyze whether they are reaching the desired audiences and, if so, whether the message is appropriately tailored.

D. Print Materials

To augment the interviews and press materials, TKG reviewed four boxes of NEA communications materials. In addition to abovementioned press materials, we reviewed:

- * Memoranda;
- * Reports;
- * Handbooks;
- * Press packets; and
- * Polling and research data.

TKG also viewed several episodes of The Learning Channel series "School Stories" and NJEA's "Classroom Closeup."

E. Survey Research

TKG sought all existing polling and focus group results conducted by the NEA in recent years. We received and reviewed:

- * National Focus Groups, The Feldman Group Inc., July, 1996;
- * NEA: National Membership, The Feldman Group, Inc., May, 1996;
- * Arizona Education Association Membership Survey, NEA Government Relations, March, 1996;
- * The Education Issue, Greenberg Research Inc., June, 1995;
- * NEA: National Membership, The Feldman Group, Inc., April, 1995;

- * Oregon Education Association/OACE Focus Group Findings, Competitive Insights Inc., January, 1995; and
- * Public Schools in a Time of Change: A National Survey of Attitudes toward Public Education, The Feldman Group Inc., May, 1994.

This information was vital in giving us a sense of the attitudes toward and perceptions of the NEA held by members and, to a lesser degree, by outside audiences. They also revealed some potential gaps. In the short period in which TKG undertook this review, we did not have the time to authorize specific polls or focus groups, but in the recommendations section, we have detailed several areas in which we believe additional survey research is necessary. The results of this research may require alteration of some of our recommendations.

To supplement the data we received, we also held informal discussions with contacts and associates - designed not to reveal what we are doing for the NEA - which were helpful from a qualitative standpoint in illuminating outside perceptions of the Association.

III. FINDINGS

SUMMARY: To review the image of an organization of the NEA's size, scope and mission, we must first examine far more than press releases and ads. We must also look at programs, policies and institutional priorities, because all areas impact on Association communications. It is important in this process to understand why the press or the public see the NEA in the light that they do - rightly or wrongly - and to see how the message is playing and whether or not substantive work must be done to increase the messenger's credibility.

A. Overview

We will use the interview data from three key areas - 1) state affiliate communications/public relations directors, 2) Washington staff and 3) governance - throughout each of the areas that we reviewed and later will provide a profile of the comments broken out by the three various groups. We begin with the most common sentiments that were expressed among all groups.

1. The Three Faces of...

As we discussed earlier, there was an almost universal concern over the multiple roles of the NEA - as a union, as a professional association and as an advocate for public education. The concern was multi-leveled, noting the strain that so many roles puts on any organization and the competition between the various functions. Most interviewees struggled over which should take precedence. They did not want to abandon the more traditional services provided by the NEA, but there was almost unanimity that unless the NEA more forcefully took up the mantle of advocate for public education that its "days were numbered," as one individual put it. Many individuals even appeared stressed and crisis-worn - understandably so - and didn't know which front to turn to next, much less how to keep traditional member needs met.

2. Internal Focus

One of the reasons for this soon became apparent. As mentioned in Section I, we were constantly told that prior to Bill Martin's arrival approximately five years ago, the lines of communication between the NEA communications operations, the organization as a whole, and the state affiliates had fallen into some state of disrepair. It was the Communications Department's charge to repair that vital link between the NEA and its affiliates. And this became a priority over clearly defining the NEA to the outside world in a way that made sense of its multiple roles. The Department appears to have succeeded in this objective. But almost inevitably, the NEA appeared to withdraw some from the more public, external arena of communications - leaving its affiliates alone in that arena.

These factors led to an organization that, by the time we began interviewing people, had spent an inordinate amount of time talking only to itself. Quite often, a question asked directly about the public's perception of NEA was answered in very member-specific language.

At the same time, we were told that the process of decision making can often be so democratized that it keeps the organization permanently focused internally, and, in so doing, can sometimes keep the NEA from taking advantage of the opportunities presented to it in the media and other public forums. It is important to note that our charge was not to examine the decision-making process of the organization per se, but we are compelled to point out that if it

is as cumbersome as it was described to us by many interviewees, then it logically should be considered in the list of items that needs to be watched due to its obvious impact on external communications.

What became key in this state of internal focus is that it allowed the NEA's outside critics to begin to define the organization. They began painting the NEA as an ossified "big labor" relic responsible for why Johnny can't read and Suzy can't add. For the most part, these critics wanted something that would *undermine* the public schools, such as vouchers or parental control over curricula. However, there was one problem - the NEA. While the Association may have been more internally focused on communications matters, it was not so in the political arena, and the NEA's success in this area often denied its adversaries the prize they sought. This lulled some individuals into a false sense of security, feeling that since the NEA was winning these battles now, it always would. The ominous truth appears to be that while one part of the organization (political) was infuriating the NEA's critics, another part (communications/image) was paying the price for it.

3. Specific comments

The following is a breakdown of how the different groups of interviewees general viewed matters:

a. State Communications/Public Relations Directors

These individuals represented more than a century of experience in dealing with the press and the public regarding the issues surrounding the NEA and its affiliates. With some exceptions, they had high praise for the NEA's Communications Department, describing it as prompt and particularly helpful in providing important "heads-ups" for developments about to occur.

When they were critical it was generally in areas outside the control of the Department - most notably, regarding information overkill from the organization. For example, comments were made about the large packets of information coming in that needed to be boiled down into easily accessible "English" with a clear explanation of how to use it. When questioned further, this information generally came from someplace in NEA other than communications.

*We need instant stuff, not big, fat reports.*⁴

⁴ As noted previously, all interviewees in this report were guaranteed that their quotes would only be used anonymously. We, in turn, will only select quotes that reflect the sentiment, as we understand it, of at least 50 percent of the interviewees in that category.

But these were minor issues with the state communications directors. What was universal was the sense of urgency with which they felt the NEA must engage itself in the debate about public education or risk further marginalization and possibly even organizational death. While we do not want to appear overly dramatic, during almost every one of these interviews, there was some expression of how serious the situation was and an underscoring of how the organization, at all levels, needed to be in - and shape - the debate.

In addition, the majority also concurred that some substantive steps or gestures were going to have to be taken to convince the public of NEA's commitment to being a part of the solution in improving public education. This group often expressed sentiments that reflected a belief that NEA had focused on its traditional union role for so long and had said "no" so often in the educational debates of the last 10 to 15 years that they had allowed themselves to be cast as the "less reform-minded" of the two teachers unions, as *U.S. News & World Report* put it.⁵ This causes them and us great concern because it undermines the credibility of the NEA when it explains its position on vouchers and other issues that are dressed up as panacea solutions to problems in public education, and perhaps more importantly, in society as a whole.

The following are additional quotes from some of the interviewees on the previously discussed subject (no individual interviewee is quoted more than once in this section):

* SENTIMENT - The NEA must proactively sell the public on the merits of public education:

We have to do this now! It can't wait. If it takes two years, we'll just be losing ground.

* SENTIMENT - what the NEA's message to the public should be:

The message is not that public schools are okay. The message should be, 'We're in a fight to save public schools - don't abandon public schools.'

The NEA needs to make it look like it's servicing kids rather than members.⁶

* SENTIMENT - on the NEA's educational reform/improvement efforts:

We can't walk the walk. We have a squishy position on reform.

⁵ Robin M. Bennefield, Dana Hawkins, Penny Leob and Thomas Toch, "Why Teachers Don't Teach," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 26, 1996.

⁶ Two interviewees both had nearly identical quotes.

*The NEA's reform efforts have always taken a back seat -
they're not even on the bus - to Shanker.*

b. Washington Staff

These interviews often focused more on tactics and resources within NEA for getting out the message, and recommendations in this area - many of which were advanced by these individuals - will follow in subsequent sections.

There were several direct themes that emerged in those interviews. There was a general agreement that a re-engagement with the press and the public was very much a needed thing and that the nature of the NEA requires a commitment by the Association's president to do that. This re-engagement seemed quite palpable with this group and with us, but there also seemed to be an underlying sentiment with many in this group that there still needs to be more institutional priority placed in this area to address the concerns expressed.

These individuals also felt very torn over the role of both advocating for members and becoming the defender of public education and supporter of meaningful reform efforts - they felt challenged by the conflict in resources, with some qualms that it might take away from member advocacy if there is to be new emphasis on the latter role.

*** QUOTES:**

Vouchers are just a battle, the war is over public education.

NEA has to be for something, not just the opposition to others' ideas.

c. Governance

By design, governance staff and Executive Committee members were interviewed last, so that most research and other interviews were completed, allowing us to review many findings and gauge their reaction. Interestingly enough, governance did not seem surprised by what we had to say. Some members of governance were even more pessimistic about the future of public education and the NEA than most interviewees in the other two categories. While there was general agreement over the seriousness of the situation, there were real differences over how to improve NEA's situation.

B. Message

1. Consistency and Focus

At the core of the image challenge facing the NEA is that of talk vs. action when it comes to improving and defending public education. As we have already discussed, there is real concern over the dual roles of member advocacy and being a voice for public education. The NEA's critics, some fair-minded commentators and even some people internally have said that these two roles conflict at times. In one sense, they certainly have. But it is also true that they do not have to. The better shape public education is in the better off the NEA's members will be. And so it is a matter of redesigning the best route to achieve these twin goals, and speaking to the public in ways that make their complementary nature implicit in everything that is said.

Unfortunately, today, the public perception is that there is a conflict between the two roles. And this, along with historical emphasis on more traditional union activities, has led some to believe NEA's commitment to quality public education, and any changes that might be needed to achieve that quality, is only lip service. The impression is that the NEA will study anything, but it will not bring hard, results-driven solutions to the table because these items might inconvenience their members.

Adoption of the strategic focus on "Restoring Public Confidence in Public Education" was a very positive step at addressing this problem and moving the NEA forward in the right direction. But we must note that this initiative was rarely spoken of by state directors, and often remains anemically connected to a business-as-usual operating mode. Indeed, when we asked state directors what NEA was doing in the area of school reform, we rarely got the same answer. If they are not in sync, then there is no way the public at large can have a clear impression of the NEA and what it stands for.

Moreover, our review of NEA self-generated materials leads us to similar conclusions regarding the Associations' external message. Despite the NEA's best intentions, we find the organization's focus on restoring public confidence in public education in its external communications is either hard to find or not getting through with consistency.

In short, everywhere we turned we found people telling us that NEA needed to demonstrate clearly and forcefully the importance of public education and what it was willing to do to ensure quality public education or face possible organizational petrification and/or death. But while this process has started, it has not yet translated into everything external the organization does. This trend must be radically accelerated. In simple language, the restoring public confidence in public education initiative needs teeth - and hopefully some of this report's recommendations will further that process.

2. Positive/negative ratio

One of the challenges to developing a more positive message is that the NEA, by its very nature, is often thrust into the position of having to say "no" to bad ideas. This has left the organization with a message that all-too-often makes it look obstructionist. This is compounded by the fact that when NEA does have a positive message, it often gets lost in the noise because the organization often has too many messages. Numerous interviewees made it clear that NEA leadership was going to have to stay focused on a couple of major ideas and talk about them repeatedly in order to be successful at turning around some of the image problems we have discussed - we agree.

3. Credibility

Another message area we observed was that until recently, NEA has been perceived as unwilling to acknowledge certain problems in education, costing the organization some credibility as a legitimate voice for reform. Finding a cause for this perception - beyond the charges of NEA adversaries - is harder for us to put our finger on because we have not seen any significant historical record of this being the case. However, in interviews in Washington, D.C. and with the states, there was a strongly held belief that the Association had been unwilling to accept problems in the classroom that are very real. It was further noted that most interviewees believed that this perception would have to change before NEA would gain credibility when it speaks of its solutions to present day education challenges.

4. Clarity

There was a widespread concern expressed in interviews that the NEA used far too much jargon, "edu-speak," qualifiers and caveats in its external communications. Our review of NEA materials finds verification for this view in past documents. But we have also found significant improvements in clarity and use of plain English over the past year, although the organization is not yet where it should be. We find this observation well-illustrated in a comparison of the NEA and AFT statements regarding the Third International Math and Science Study. There is an obvious difference in style of the two statements and we do not endorse AFT's statement over NEA's, but it is interesting to observe the different tones and use of language found in the first two paragraphs of both:

* Statement of Bob Chase
President, National Education Association
on the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS)
November 20, 1996

The TIMSS report can be a lightning rod to refocus the national dialogue on student performance if we choose to use it to

constructively elevate the reform debate rather than resorting to the all too frequent "sky is falling" rhetoric that such reports often receive.

It does not serve our students well if in our rush to rank the performance of our eighth graders we fail to look at this measure in full context. Making our students "first in the world" in math and science by the year 2000 was just one of eight national goals set by President Bush and the 50 governors in 1989. Clearly, we are not there yet, instead remaining on par with most of the other industrialized nations, including England, Canada, France, and Germany.

* Statement by Albert Shanker
President, American Federation of Teachers
on the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS)
November 20, 1996

The news from the TIMSS study is mixed, but not surprising. American eighth-graders are below average in math and above average in science achievement compared to their peers in 40 other countries. If we take seriously that we can learn from other countries whose students surpass ours, this study upends some of the conventional wisdom about what our schools need.

What we don't need to worry about is a longer school day and year, diversity, and shifting public money to private schools. Our students spend more actual time in class than their German and Japanese counterparts, and teachers in all three countries cite "diversity of student ability" as a challenge in their teaching. None of these countries with the highest achieving students has a voucher program like those proposed for American schools. What we do need to worry about is how time in the classroom is used and the content of what it taught.

This particular comparison was commented on by one of the state communications directors. The interviewee felt that the NEA statement showed real improvement over past styles of dealing with issues such as this, but argued that the AFT statement still demonstrated a more comfortable style linguistically and more effectively turned the message around to the AFT's key message.

5. Political Orientation

The last major challenge is one discussed in probably every interview and characterized in a plethora of news clips. The issue in question is the political nature of NEA. It is commonly characterized as a big, powerful arm of the Democratic Party. There are two issues here. The first is the perception of the NEA as a political heavyweight. This is a double-edged sword. In many political and legislative battles, the NEA has been well-served by this perception - and, of course, the reality behind it. But from a message standpoint, it contributes to the notion of the Association as a gargantuan special interest group - and this is not consistent with the objective of portraying the NEA concerned first and foremost with our children.

The second issue is the partisan orientation of the NEA. One interviewee responded, "Someone needs to remind NEA that its membership is 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 - Democrat, Republican and Independent." On this subject, there is not much to say. Obviously, the Association's image would benefit if its PAC contributions were distributed more evenly, but one cannot wave a magic wand and suddenly make dozens of Republicans decide to stop supporting vouchers and start improving public education. However, perhaps the NEA can place greater external communications emphasis on the few members of the GOP it does find worthy of support.

6. Going on Offense

In general, our findings in the area of message suggest that the NEA's adversaries have been more effective at advancing their messages and initiatives, and succeeded in putting the Association on defense - and keeping it there. The NEA needs more aggressive co-opting of critics' messages to occur. In other words, the organization needs define its own programs and messages in key areas and push, push, push those messages in an all-out effort. The NEA needs to make its critics explain why it does not like the NEA's ideas - not the other way around.

C. Issue and Image Challenges

We asked state communications directors about the biggest issues facing the NEA both nationally and at the state level. After doing that, we compared their comments to press coverage and our own observations and experiences as communications professionals. The following are the key issues we have selected (they are ranked according to the frequency with which they were mentioned):

1. Education Reform

Whether the NEA likes this term or not, almost everyone used it, even if begrudgingly. This issue challenge seems to be at the heart of everything we examined. The vast majority, if not all, of the state directors said that the Association was viewed more often than not as the obstacle to improving public education and not as part of the solution. All of them said they had critics in their state trying to paint them with this brush stroke. Some said that while they had made some headway in their own state affiliate reputation in this regard, when the National is brought into the picture the negative perception resurfaces.

2. Vouchers

That this issue exists at all, much less as such a big threat, is really a function of NEA adversaries' ability to define the first issue - education reform - on their own terms. Many state felt that this issue was going to be an ongoing problem for them and that the only thing that would help in the long run is turning the organization's image around on the first point. In other words, if the NEA becomes viewed as a supporter and creator of education reform with its own positive program, and not just seen as a naysayer on what is now the most visible "reform" proposal, then the Association will be much more effective at making vouchers go away. We agree.

3. Politics

As noted previously, the NEA's political might is an ever-present theme with its critics and this has worked its way into mainstream press that sees the Association as a huge political force. Complicating that, of course, is the perception that the NEA is joined at the hip to the Democratic Party. The state communications directors were emphatic about this. Some states talked about how they had overcome this issue by really operating as a bipartisan group and by thoroughly distancing themselves from the National's political operation. This issue is real and a problem for NEA because it cannot be fixed by asking the communications department to send out more press releases. But again, until and unless there is a way to find common ground with a significant group of Republicans on at least one critical issue, there are no easy solutions short of downplaying politics in the Association's external communications activities.

4. "The NEA cares more about gay rights and protecting bad teachers than kids"

This comment - in these exact words - was repeated commonly by interviewees. Obviously, it is not reflective of their opinion - or ours - but relays charges with which they had to deal. On further probing, we found that these statements did not usually come from mainstream press, or often, from press at all, but instead centered around the passage of B9.

We realize that some states felt B9 was a very big problem for them and others hardly noticed it.

The protecting bad teachers part of the comment we believe is a real issue as well. As a matter of fact, one of our more important recommendations in this report deals with supporting standards for teachers and students; however, in this instance, we heard the two phrases linked together so much that when we asked, most said that's the way it was phrased to them. We believe we were probably hearing the residual of the actual phraseology given to Concerned Women of America members and others when they were asked to flood NEA and affiliate phone lines.

What is important in this matter is that state communications directors felt they had been handed a problem from the Representative Assembly that was completely off-message, with no guidance or effective crisis management from the NEA - and that it was not the first time this had happened. (They also referenced and we documented in press coverage the NEA boycott of Florida orange juice.) What frustrated these communications directors is these "off message" items were getting far more coverage than the "education related matters" NEA is doing, in their opinion.

This goes to a thorny problem. The NEA is a vastly democratic organization, particularly in its RA structure. This means that in communications terms, it may well be inevitable that it will continue to go "off message" at times. As we said before, it is neither our intention nor our charge to recommend changes in that arena. However, it does argue for bolder, more defined action in the areas the NEA needs to focus on - promoting real education reform, for example.

3. Moving from the Battle to the War

The previous four items brings us to the summation, previously quoted, of one large challenge that was best summed up by one interviewee:

Vouchers are just a battle, the war is over public education.

We agree. The issue facing NEA is the value and future of public education. We do not believe that the American public believes public education is dead - the Association's own polling showed a 67 percent approval rating of public schools in 1995. However, as we noted before, when the public was asked about schools outside of their area, that approval rating dropped to 57 percent. At that point, one has more than four of every 10 Americans believing that public schools are in serious trouble. The truth of the matter is that, as one interviewee put it, our society has begun to believe anything "public" is devalued. As a result, we believe that the centerpiece of NEA's future external message should deal with salvaging public education where it is being discarded, fixing it where it is broke, praising it where it is

successful (which is probably a far greater instance than the public would guess) and standing for something meaningful in the debate.

The last part about standing for something meaningful is important - the operative word being "for." Some of the most visible roles of the NEA and affiliates in the last several years have been political or legal activities in which NEA was fighting against an idea. Examples of this include the NEA's legal battle against Milwaukee's vouchers for sectarian schools, the fight against vouchers in California and the fight against parental rights in Colorado. In most of these cases, the press has identified the NEA as *the* main opposition group.

The NEA has taken a more positive position in advertorials on national standards and has offered financial support for charter schools and school choice. However, these positions have not been advocated so strongly that the press has picked up on them in a big way. This is what we meant in the earlier characterization of talk vs. action. The Association will have to be very active on a positive issue before it will be considered as important as fighting vouchers or bad parental choice bills.

D. NEA Communications Department

We must start this section by reiterating that state communications directors had high praise for the work of NEA's Communications Department. They felt the department had done an excellent job of providing them the tools and "heads-ups" to do a better job in their state. Which begs an obvious question: How can they praise the Communications Department and also lament so wholeheartedly the NEA's image problem? The answer isn't that hard to find.

First of all, the NEA apparently made a conscious decision approximately five years ago to focus on rebuilding internal communications lines. In this, the Department has excelled. And second, there also appears to be a similar choice in terms of overall focus of the institution.

We do feel that the challenges we have discussed dictate a continued engagement of the NEA president in the debate about public education, whether it is debating Lamar Alexander or appearing on *Crossfire*. We do realize, however, that continued press interest will not rival that of the last four months at all times. But we do intend to make recommendations later in this report that will help keep the NEA before the public and the press regularly.

While literally every interviewee was encouraged by the renewed activism of the NEA president, there were a sizeable number who believe that still more needs to be done. There is a growing concern that the president's calendar, particularly the heavy burden of member events around the country, could curtail his ability to engage the press in Washington, D.C. There were others who felt a desire to continue vesting alternative spokespeople, such as other officers and executive committee members, with the authority to speak for the Association. We

believe this is probably a more desirable approach than expecting the NEA president to not attend member events, although we would recommend a healthy eye be kept focused on balancing such demands. While it may seem odd that this section, addressing as it does the Communications Department, would devote so much space to the president's availability, there is a good reason for that. Without fast response and the instant availability of a significant spokesperson such as the president, the Communications Department is operating with at least one of their hands tied behind their back.

In addition, we found two other items of concern:

- * When the Communications Department is brought into discussions about anything involving operations, policy, events or plans with any potential impact on external communications; and
- * The allocation of resources to the Department.

In regards to the former, the issue is not whether the Communications Department is in the room every time someone has a conversation at NEA. The issue is more related to an institutional culture which needs to incorporate thinking about the external effects of what it does, just as it now thinks about the effects of the NEA's action on members.

Secondly, we noticed that the media unit of NEA is understaffed even for a responsive mode - much less one that is proactive. So if the organization wants to start defining itself to the world and shaping, rather than reacting to, the debate on public education, that unit will require several more media professionals. And we stress that while "redeployment" is a good idea, and has to potential to break down some bureaucratic barriers that have not helped the NEA communicate with a clear and focused message, it should neither mean transferring good media personnel away from a unit that is already understaffed nor assigning people to the unit who have never dealt with the press or media strategy.

In general, it is time for external media operations to go to the Ball like everyone else in Cinderella. Otherwise, the beauty of NEA and its members' contribution to an invisible institution will remain unnoticed.

E. Press Coverage

1. News Clips

TKG reviewed press clips collected by NEA that cover, primarily, the period of time between July 1993 and December 1996. These clips focus on a spectrum of issues from violence to politics, from school reform to race relations.

On average, the image of the NEA as a big union and political heavyweight is the one that resonates with the press. The NEA is most often described as "powerful." A *New Orleans Times-Picayune* news story headlined "NEA Goes All Out Against School Privatization" has the following lead:

*If the National Education Association were a motto, it would be, 'Don't tread on me.' If it were a movie hero, it would be Dirty Harry. This is not an organization to cross. It gets mad. Then it tries to get even.*⁷

Less flippantly, *The New Republic* sums up:

*all that [NEA] implies: out-of-touch ed-school professors, union officials out for their own gain and...staunch support of Democratic candidates in Congress.*⁸

Bastions of conservatism like *Forbes* and *The Wall Street Journal* editorial board have targeted NEA, and characterized the association as powerful, political, self-serving and anti-reform. In this day of electronic research, their characterization of NEA shapes the outlook of many purportedly objective reporters.

Although, as noted previously, the NEA serves multiple roles, the press clips indicate that in articles where the NEA is the focus of the story, it is talked about in terms of its role as a union - not as an advocate for public education or teacher quality. In articles where the NEA plays the role of the voice of education, that role and NEA are not central to the article's theme. Such articles include those where NEA is quoted on facts concerning numbers of public schools, spending data, etc.

TKG found that NEA's political activity receives more press attention than its other activities, probably because where NEA has taken strong action, that action has been in the political or legal arena. Just as significantly, these battles often showcase the NEA on the defensive and fighting *against* an idea. Examples of this include the NEA's legal battle against Milwaukee's vouchers for sectarian schools, the fight against vouchers in California, and the fight against parental rights in Colorado. In most of the arguments, the press has identified NEA as *the* main opposition group.

On charter schools, national standards, and school choice, the NEA has taken a more positive position, by advocating on behalf of these issues in advertorials, by launching its own initiatives, and by offering financial support for reform experiments. However, the NEA has

⁷ Beth Frerking, "NEA Goes All Out Against School Privatization," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, July 24, 1994.

⁸ Sara Mosle, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Education," *The New Republic*, June 17, 1996.

not been so strong in its advocacy that the press has picked up on NEA's stand on those issues. For example, charter schools is a tricky issue given the wide disparities in what the term really means, and the fact that there are bad ones and good ones. As a result, NEA's position has been misunderstood by less-informed mainstream reporters and mischaracterized by critics, even though NEA plans on spending \$1.5 million on charter schools in the next five years.

Below, we have provided a "snapshot" view of coverage of NEA on specific issues.

a. Reform

The NEA and its affiliates have been described as obstructionist, as "muted," and as "greeting reform with relative silence." The NEA is not mentioned at all in *The Philadelphia Inquirer's* version of the Associated Press article on the signing of the Goals 2000 Educate America Act. The *Denver Post* perspectives editor writes in a column:

*One can search history in vain for any evidence that the teachers union has ever supported meaningful reform of the public education system... More recently, it has resisted vouchers, charter schools, teachers licensing, merit pay, privatization - you name it.*⁹

Business Week comments on "decades of NEA opposition to change" and writes that conservatives call NEA "the single greatest obstructor of education reform in America." *Business Week* characterizes NEA reform efforts as an attempt to catch the "reform train [that] was leaving with the NEA still on the platform."¹⁰

In *U.S. News & World Report's* February 1996 article on teachers' unions, NEA is depicted as largely obstructionist but "softening" toward reform. The reporter cites critics who refer to "*token NEA reform projects*" (italics added).¹¹

b. Vouchers

Usually, the NEA is identified as *the* main opposition group to voucher movements. While some newspapers portray the NEA's side of the story fairly, the Association's strong action against vouchers adds to its image as anti-reform and fearful of change. A typical

⁹ Al Knight, "Teachers Union Doesn't Deserve Automatic Checkoff for Political Dues," *Denver Post*, March 28, 1996.

¹⁰ Paul Magnusson, "Is the NEA Getting on the Reform Train?," *Business Week*, December 9, 1996.

¹¹ Bennefield, et al, *U.S. News & World Report*, February 26, 1996.

example is the *Chicago Tribune* story on vouchers, which focuses on teachers' unions in its portion on the critics of vouchers.¹² In many articles where California's Proposition 174 is discussed, the \$12 million negative advertising campaign by the California Teachers Association is highlighted. Both the NEA and ACLU undertook legal action against vouchers in Milwaukee, but NEA's general counsel argued the case, which may have led the media to give the Association top billing - not necessarily a bad thing but still one more example of where the NEA is against something.

c. Charter Schools

On this subject, coverage is mixed. The NEA has funded five charter schools, while some state affiliates have fought laws allowing charter schools. There have been some positive results - for example, a Nashville *Tennessean* editorial on NEA-funded charter schools opens with the wry comment, "Look who's opening charter schools," and ends by applauding the move and saying, "The country could hardly ask for better teachers."¹³ The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* wrote an editorial on the same subject, where it called the NEA's decision "refreshing" but cautioned, "Let's not break out the bells and whistles just yet."¹⁴

By contrast a *Time* article focused just a few paragraphs on how a "hugely influential" state union "spent a fortune" on fighting charter schools, but the article also writes fairly about some of the reasons why.¹⁵ One *Washington Post* article reports that unions are concerned about charter schools but have not been very vocal about them.¹⁶ And a *Christian Science Monitor* editorial says that charter schools were "fought tooth and nail by the unions."¹⁷

d. Teacher Tenure/Merit Pay

The NEA is rarely mentioned in articles pertaining to teacher tenure or merit pay. Rather, some articles refer to "teachers' unions" or specific local union officials and their stand against replacing teacher tenure with merit pay plans. The bulk of the tenure articles focus on sensationalized stories about allegedly corrupt, unfit teachers who are able to keep

¹² David S. Cloud, "Ohio School Provides Lesson for a Nation," *Chicago Tribune*, October 23, 1996.

¹³ "NEA's Learning Project," *Tennessean*, April 22, 1996.

¹⁴ "A New Leaf?," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 18, 1996.

¹⁵ Claudia Wallis, "A Class of Their Own," *Time Magazine*, October 31, 1994.

¹⁶ Mary Jordan, "Charter Schools Rewrite Public Lesson Plans," *Washington Post*, April 30, 1994.

¹⁷ "For Better Schools," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 23, 1996.

their jobs due to tenure laws. In an *Education Week* article about tenure Myron Lieberman states, "It's one of those things that gets a lot of attention in the media, but nothing much happens."¹⁸

e. Politics

The NEA is portrayed in news coverage as being politically very powerful and as promoting a liberal Democratic agenda. In addition, the organization is frequently seen as a special interest that "buys" Democratic politicians and blocks reform through those politicians so that teachers are protected while students suffer.

The headline of an *Investors Business Daily* editorial captures the image in three words, "Power, Not Pupils."¹⁹ *Forbes* characterizes NEA's political action as "a ruthless use of power in pursuit of perquisites."²⁰ *U.S. News & World Report* says, "Teacher unions have become the single most influential force in public education.... Union politics ... work against quality teaching."²¹ Perhaps most influentially, David Broder quotes the *U.S. News* article in a column where he talks about the NEA's "financial and political clout," which has "frustrated" education reform.²²

f. Unions

There were numerous articles on unions in the clippings we received from the NEA. Nearly half of those articles could be considered anti-union. One columnist states, "[w]hile once they were organizations playing catch-up on behalf of a chronically underpaid and enormously important profession, teachers' union to many have become one of the big, bad wolves of public life."²³ Or as one "education specialist" puts it, "[t]hey have been very good at maintaining just enough interest in reform to create the impression they're interested in

¹⁸ Drew Lindsay, "Critics Target Teacher Tenure But Most Blows Miss the Mark," *Education Week*, April 17, 1996.

¹⁹ "Power, Not Pupils," *Investor's Business Daily*, May 6, 1996.

²⁰ Peter Brimelow and Leslie Spencer, "Comeuppance," *Forbes*, February 13, 1995.

²¹ Bennefield, et al, *U.S. News & World Report*, February 26, 1996.

²² David S. Broder, "Democrats, Challenge Teachers' Unions," *The News & Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 11, 1996.

²³ Pat Howard, "A Kinder, Gentler Pennsylvania Teachers' Union Today?," *Erie Daily Times*, March 26, 1994.

change. It's a calculated device."²⁴ Almost all of the remaining articles are more neutral in tone, reporting only on a particular union issue - usually at the local level. Only a handful of the articles are positive toward or supportive of teachers' unions.

In the "union" articles, a teachers' union is a teachers' union and there is little differentiation between the AFT and the NEA or between locals and state chapters (except in specific, local articles such as a certain district on strike). Overall, the union articles cover a wide range of specific issues. For example, topics include: cutbacks in public employee pension contributions; disputes over pay raises; legal and financial protection for union members; union role in politics; PACs; school board elections, etc.; legalities of union (teacher) strikes; agency fee/fair share contributions; dilapidated school facilities; collective bargaining in higher education; right-to-work states; tactics used against leaders or legislators not "towing the union line"; and teacher seniority. Some of the articles, from a wide variety of outlets, focused solely on the potential NEA/AFT merger.

2. Broadcast

In evaluating broadcast coverage of the NEA, we focused primarily on clips and segments aired over the last six months. We believed a smaller time frame was needed than for print because there is no electronic broadcast database comparable to services such as Nexis, Westlaw and Datatimes in print journalism which are accessed almost reflexively by print reporters. As a matter of fact, broadcast journalists either take their direction from print coverage or simply follow their own instincts.

We know there are good education pieces produced on television and radio, as evidenced by the Broadcast Awards sponsored by the Association.

The problem areas are typically in the faster-breaking stories where myths and stereotypes are more likely to be taken for the truth than in the more in-depth piece that allows a producer or reporter to explore both fiction and fact. During this six-month evaluation period, we see public education is particularly victimized by broadcast journalists who repeated the assumption that America's public schools are close to failure. That was clear in numerous television stories from the nightly news that never mentioned the NEA or teachers' unions. The problem, however, is the perpetuation of the idea that the vast majority of schools are broken and in need of serious overhaul.

When the clips we watched did feature President Chase speaking on behalf of the Association, we saw important evidence that NEA was back in the fight. We are compelled, though, to echo the sentiment of one state communications director who felt that President Chase's language still lacked the most important element - his first-hand knowledge of

²⁴ Rene Sanchez, "Teachers Union on Defensive in School Reform Struggle," *Washington Post*, June 3, 1996.

children and education coming from his experience as a teacher. We recommend that more effort be focused on putting back the first-person, human-impact side into the NEA President's language - use real examples of what idea or funding cut means, place the child in the center of the message and add his classroom experience to make the statement real.

We did want to draw particular attention to the *Nightline* story of September 9, 1996. There were several journalistic freedoms taken by Forrest Sawyer, who was sitting in for Ted Koppel, that we may not like, but they are important examples of how misconceptions take hold through the media. First of all, Sawyer made several mischaracterizations about how troubled American schools are. Second, he clearly helped perpetuate the image of the NEA as first and foremost a selfish partisan political special interest group:

The National Education Association is to the Democrats what the National Rifle Association is to Republicans - a big, rich, powerful lobby looking out for its own interest.

Sawyer also went on to characterize the American public's largely indifferent or negative reaction to Senator Dole's attacks on teachers' unions as a function more of how the message was crafted than because the Senator was wrong.

3. Advertorials

As with the press releases, each advertorial (published weekly in *Education Week*, *Washington Post* and *National Post Weekly*) focuses on a different topic. In recent months, the advertorials have discussed topics ranging from general supports for teachers' unions to making higher education more accessible to all; from the 104th Congress to saving inner-city schools. The most significant - even revolutionary in their approach - have been the "Sleeping with the Enemy?," "Paradigm Lost" and "Back to the Future" pieces, which really do make the case for the NEA's transformation into adopting aspects of craft unionism and becoming more of a professional association devoted first and foremost to education quality.

The majority of recent advertorials mention programs or initiatives that the NEA or its affiliates, have launched in response to part of each of the issues he addresses. However, just one, thus far, directly mentions the NEA president's teaching career. Overall, the advertorials are generally positive and, depending on the topic, offer anecdotes to help explain what is right or wrong with education policy and practices today. Further, the advertorials propose tangible suggestions for reform and community involvement while incorporating supportive quotes from outside and credible sources.

A quick analysis AFT's advertorials reveals that AFT tends to have more topical continuity in advertorials than the NEA. For example, in June 1996, Shanker wrote about disengaged students. The following week, he continued to delve into the topic of success in school and motivating factors for successful students. Overall, Shanker tends to take on a more

aggressive, even sarcastic, tone in his advertorials. He routinely dissects education studies/surveys (both good and bad) conducted by other groups and dismisses those with weak arguments. Also, unlike the NEA, he does not refer, at least directly, to AFT programs and proposals.

F. NEA Print Materials

One should always remember that while some of us are more comfortable in casual attire and other like the Wall Street look, most of us pick a consistent style of clothing regularly. It does not mean we can never step out of our mold and dress a little differently - it just means most of us have an individual consensus of how we want to look. We believe that some consistency in look also lets an organization more effectively cut through the clutter and more clearly convey messages about itself. In our review of NEA print materials, there was one particular matter that concerned us - primarily, the materials appeared as if they could have come from 100 different groups. There was no consistency to the graphic look or message. It seemed that each unit in the organization was free to adopt whatever graphic look that unit choose. This divergence of activities, while certainly not deadly to an organization, often leads to an organization's divergence of message as well.

G. NEA Electronic Materials

1. "School Stories"

As part of our research, we viewed two episodes of "School Stories": "Putting Kids First" and "Better Business, Better Schools." Overall, the content of both episodes was consistent with the positive messages NEA would like to communicate to the public. "Putting Kids First," as its name suggests, highlighted a rural North Carolina elementary school where children and their needs were the priority. "Better Business, Better Schools" took place in a high school and had a slightly different focus of producing well-adjusted, highly-skilled people for the local work force. Both programs emphasized caring, competent teachers.

While we realize the "School Stories" segments are primarily financed by The Learning Channel, we feel that the NEA is a not visible partner in the project based on the two episodes we watched. Only when the credits roll does one get the impression that the NEA played a part. Even then, it is unknown whether the NEA was involved in the featured school or production of the show or both. However, we like the print ads the NEA developed for each program, and we feel this type of local advertising should continue. If The Learning Channel is willing to increase NEA's visibility on the programs, then this should be taken advantage of in order to enhance NEA's role as a positive influence in children's education and education reform. Additionally, the telephone numbers given at the end of the episodes for additional information, catalogues or videos have not been set up to indicate where or

whom one may be calling. If NEA will be receiving calls as a result of the show, it should be noted - thereby adding more leverage to this valuable vehicle.

2. Web site

The NEA web site is both interesting and informative. We liked the look of the overall web site, particularly the "Good Schools, Good Students" pages. It is good that the web site referenced President Chase's weekly advertorials in *The Washington Post* (though it did not mention either *Education Weekly* or the *National Post Weekly*), but we did not find any NEA press releases or other media outreach vehicles. Whether or not the media accesses the web site on a regular basis, we recommend that selected press releases be put on the web site.

When reading feedback from members and non-members who visited the site, it appeared that most people felt the site was relevant to their needs and that the site is easily accessible through web search engines and browsing. What did not seem so apparent to some, however, was the ease in finding particular information on the web site. This may in large part, be attributable to the wide variety of information needed or desired by your members and the general public who visit the site. In particular, the web site lack basic data on topics such as membership applications and benefits information, telephone numbers for general inquiries and a site for ESP's.

3. Co-op advertising program

For NEA's current fiscal year, there are 33 states participating in the co-op advertising program with a budget of \$1.6 million from NEA and, under the current matching system, the combined advertising buy is over \$2 million nationwide. We begin this segment talking about the buy because it is important in analyzing the spots themselves. What do we mean? Basically, budgetary constraints on this program are such that participating states are able to buy advertising space for a very limited time each year. Most of the participants we spoke with used this money to buy a small amount of time either around the beginning of the school year or at the opening of their state legislative session.

The size of the ad buy prevents the program from making a significant impact on broad public attitudes about the NEA. Moreover, the creative has a soft and fuzzy quality that, it quickly becomes apparent, is designed more to make NEA members feel good about their organization than to change public attitudes. Then there is the fact that many states make their buys based on programs that teachers watch. Add up all three factors and the conclusion is obvious - the program has actually become an *internal communications device*.

We believe it should be viewed and treated as such. But it does beg the question, given the cost of television advertising in larger markets - is this the most effective way for the NEA and state affiliates to talk to their members? On the other hand, most state affiliates that participate view this as a useful service to continue providing. Why? Because their members

love seeing these spots on TV, and because the ads "make them feel good." This quote was ubiquitous. And, if one truly believes NEA's members are often on the "frontline," then providing them some degree of outside praise of their profession is certainly not a bad idea.

As we said, the majority of those we talked with concurred that they liked the spots. They are soft image spots that are designed to make the viewer feel warm and fuzzy - this is how the ads were often described. This is consistent with how the campaign is being used, which, as we said, is dictated by the budget. It is our opinion that if this program probably serves a useful purpose in member communications, but one should not confuse it with hard issue advertising or some of the other broadcast options that may be needed if NEA decides to implement some of the recommendations found in this report.

Finally, almost all of the state communications directors expressed a desire for more money from NEA in this program. But given the Association's image needs, we believe that if there is more money to be put into television advertising, it be focused on external communications - and that requires a different approach.

H. Summary of Findings

In the many interviews, reviews of news clips, evaluation of materials, digestion of relevant polls and tracking surveys, we were bombarded with hosts of images that ran the gamut. The NEA has heard them all, and to its credit, has not lost its head every time a negative image of the Association was advanced. However, over the long term, one must expect that the most commonly used images would stick to the NEA - unfortunately, it is not a Teflon organization. The perceptions that most concerned us - and, in our opinion, have begun to stick - are as follows:

- * NEA is a monolithic union that looks out for number one at everyone else's - including kids' - expense.
- * The NEA is the greatest obstacle to needed education reform.
- * The NEA is a giant political arm of the Democratic Party.
- * The NEA has nothing new or positive to offer.

At the same time, we found an amazing unused weapon in the NEA arsenal that remains potent and untarnished - the teacher. Teachers still enjoy a healthy approval rating depending on which poll one reads.

So why does this powerful group with this amazing weapon have so many image problems? Well, in some cases, it probably did not have as many as it thought it did - whereas in other cases, it was so besieged that it was hard to know what to do next.

The state communications directors thought they knew why. They believe, for the most part, that the NEA's heart was in the right place, but, that in fact, its heart was everywhere. Simply put by one interviewee, the National Education Association had become the "National Everything Association" to its members and some outside observers.

In light of these findings, we came to the analogy that was found in the executive summary. There is a war going on over public education and NEA is still in a business-as-usual mode.

How serious is that in our opinion? It is as serious as any threat, domestic or foreign, to our nation, because the greatest democracy of the modern age will not lead the world in the next century if public education becomes an abandoned social program and the dumping ground for those students who couldn't make it into a charter, magnet or private school. While America flees to the suburbs, and middle-class suburban parents, armed with vouchers, flee the public schools, will throngs of neglected children be left to an education wasteland? If so, how will these children grow up to become full participants in our democracy? And how will equal opportunity - the foundation of American values - become anything but a relic of the past?

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY: Given the realities facing it, the NEA must adopt a crisis mode of operations. There must be a strong plan, streamlined decision-making, clear lines of authority, and constant, undiverted focus on the message and the mission. The goal is to save and improve public education, and in so doing, enhance the lives and livelihoods of NEA members and preserve this vital institution.

The strategy requires shifting to an approach in which speed, flexibility and creativity are emphasized over raw size and strength. In other words, the NEA spends less time attacking its opponents and more co-opting them - taking some of their positions, molding them to be beneficial to NEA members, and becoming the creator, rather than the receiver, of education reforms.

This will require more than rhetoric - it will also demand substance. Skepticism abounds and will not be allayed easily. As communications consultants - not educational experts - we cannot do more than outline some possible areas of action. But we can say that substantive programs must be initiated and/or retooled, they should be designed to produce measurable results, and they should be crafted with at least a partial eye toward their communications value.

The vehicle for mobilizing the NEA nationally, its state affiliates and local Associations should be a campaign to redefine the NEA as not only the defender but also the improver of public education - an organization willing to swallow some bitter medicine in pursuit of its ultimate mission. The American public will thus learn that the NEA is their number one ally in the common goal of ensuring better teachers, better students and better public schools. And the NEA will then reemerge as the central player in all debates about America's public education system.

A. IMAGE - Redefining NEA to the World

In recent months, there has been steady movement toward turning NEA away from an industrial-style union by embracing attributes of craft unionism, and improving its public image. A variety of important measures have been adopted, including:

- * "Redeployment," a positive start to make the NEA less bureaucratic and more flexible;
- * New initiatives such as charter schools; and
- * An entirely new tone to the president's "advertorials," as most clearly illustrated by the "Sleeping with the Enemy," "Paradigm Lost" and "Back to the Future" pieces which ran in the last two months.

These efforts and others, while important and to be commended, are not sufficient to the task at hand. They have barely been noticed - yet - and when they have (see *Business Week*, December 11, 1996), it is with suspicion.

What is needed is a campaign which gives the changes already underway a singular focus, ratchets up their pace and scope, and mobilizes the entire organization to work in lockstep toward the overriding goal of saving public education. Only such a campaign - at a minimum of two years in duration - will achieve the dual objectives of mobilizing the NEA to a crisis mode and bringing the NEA's public image more in line with reality.

THE CAMPAIGN:

Better Teachers, Better Students, Better Public Schools

We have given this campaign the working title of "Better teachers, better students, better public schools." It builds on the existing "Good schools, good students" effort but is oriented as much toward improving the schools as publicizing the positive changes already happening.

In essence, it is the communications framework for informing the public about the NEA's transformation away from industrial-style unionism toward adopting attributes of craft unionism and focusing on ensuring the highest quality labor force among members.

This campaign requires the NEA to retool its message and rhetoric, to cause those who have shut their ears to start listening and those who have closed their minds to start thinking differently about the NEA and the future of America's children.

But this will not be sufficient - not by a longshot. Only substance will cause those who have taken new notice to decide that the organization's change is more than PR flackery - that it is for real.

The campaign is the umbrella both for the substantive change, already started, that must be made in the organization's operations, culture and primary function, and for the new and compelling image it must present to America.

1. Message

The message should be clear, simple and repetitive: The NEA works for better teachers, better students, better public schools. Message points should be focused on the positive - presenting the true viewpoint that the NEA is open-minded, dedicated to a higher principle than self-interest, focused always on the *well-being of our children*.

2. Substance

While we do not pretend to say exactly what the NEA should do in the way of the substantive programs that must underlie this campaign, we can say that they should be created - and in such a way that they can be compellingly publicized. The programs can range from working to expand teacher training and retraining through partnerships with school boards, businesses, foundations and universities; to advocating the establishment of national teaching standards that are tangible and measurable, but also sufficiently flexible to take into account differences in school districts and student populations; to the expansion of charter school initiatives, along with some type of evaluation that allows the NEA to compare them and their achievements with other charters, and expanding the Learning Laboratories initiative.

3. Action Plan

We have developed a preliminary and very general action plan for the first year of the campaign, consisting of a staggered rollout. The campaign should be developed in its final form for a duration of two years at a minimum, with the prospect of extending it well into the future. We believe that two years is the minimal time it will take to have a measurable impact on the perceptions of key audiences, but additional research, brainstorming and planning is necessary before a concrete action plan of this duration can be properly developed.

In all likelihood, the action plan should include:

- * Op-ed pieces;
- * Talk show appearances;
- * Editorial board meetings;
- * Media tours;

- * Advertising;
- * Education Summit; and
- * Program rollout.

We will repeat: The Better Teachers, Better Students, Better Public Schools campaign should be the number one focus on NEA external efforts over the next year. We believe this will provide the impetus for shifting to a crisis mode of operations and for improving the NEA's public image, resulting in an increase in the association's ability to enhance the classroom experience.

The remaining subsections in the NEA National Recommendations section deal with general recommendations, addressing first some broader matters and then additional detail about the NEA's external communications efforts.

B. RESEARCH - Finding the Right Approach

Trying to convince the public that the NEA is their best ally in the struggle to improve public education without empirically and qualitatively analyzing perceptions and persuadability is akin to playing a football game without knowing whether the opponent is most vulnerable to a rushing or passing game.

Thus, for the "Better teachers, better students, better public schools" campaign - as well as for its broader outreach efforts - the NEA needs to conduct survey research both in the form of public opinion polls (for empirical data) and focus groups (for qualitative findings).

We emphasize: the purpose of polling is not to determine the NEA's position on any issue or matter of concern - it is to identify how best to communicate its position.

C. MESSAGE - Coordination, Consistency, Clarity

Message is everything. In today's cacophonous world, any organization or individual wishing to influence public perceptions has a very narrow window with which to make an impact on key audiences. Only a clear, consistent and compelling message - communicated through creative repetition - can cut through the noise.

The NEA has made major improvements in honing its message and trying to incorporate it into Association communications outreach over the past year. But these efforts have not yet gone far enough and they have not yet filtered sufficiently through the organization.

As in every other area, the NEA must adopt a crisis mode of operations when it comes to the message. That means use of survey research to craft a single overriding slogan and series of supporting themes that have proven persuasive among key audiences. The NEA should seek adoption of the slogan in every print document, electronic material (e.g. video, web site) and communication put out by the Association, and the willpower to avoid being diverted - whether by external events or internal pressures - away from the central message.

D. MESSENGERS - The Human Face of Teachers

The world's most finely crafted message won't amount to a hill of beans without a credible and persuasive messenger.

All of the polling we have seen indicates clearly that teachers are viewed positively by the vast majority of the American public - and they rate higher than most other professions. Yet in the past, the NEA has not always put teachers first. But if the NEA is to define itself to the outside world, rather than let its adversaries do it, then it must put teachers first - explicitly and out front - as its primary messengers to the outside world.

E. MEDIA RELATIONS - Changing the Proactive/Reactive Ratio

The NEA's media relations operation does the best job possible with the resources available. Unfortunately, those resources are insufficient to allow staff to do much more than react to the crisis of the day.

If the NEA is to shift to a crisis mode of operations, the press staff are on the front lines. And if the NEA is to change public perceptions of itself, media relations must have the ability to be proactive - to follow a plan from its start to its conclusion without being sidetracked. In other words, they need adequate support from every level of the association.

First and foremost, the NEA's media relations operations needs a significant staffing increase. As noted previously, the Association cannot control the degree to which it will need to respond to incoming requests; the only way to ensure that it can act proactively is by having enough staff to do both.

Second, the news media relations unit in the Communications Department *must* be the focal point for *all* press outreach from the NEA. If it is not - if other Departments and individuals are doing their own thing - then that can only result in mixed messages being sent to the media and run counter to the goal of presenting a coherent image for the Association.

In general, we believe the Communications Department's proactive outreach should utilize the NEA president, other officers, and Executive Committee members for:

- * Periodic press briefings for education reporters, especially new ones;

- * Talk show appearances, wherever appropriate;
- * Regular op-ed pieces;
- * Selected speech opportunities; and
- * Feature/profile opportunities.

F. PAID MEDIA - A More Strategic Approach

The creative quality of the NEA's advertising is first-rate, but its direction seems to be controlled by two factors: internal considerations and the size of the buy.

We recommend starting at ground zero with a thorough evaluation of what the NEA wants to accomplish with paid media. In both the advertorial and the co-op program, we found high quality at all levels within the organization, but not always a clear understanding of what goals NEA wanted to achieve with the items.

Ultimately, there is an important place for paid media in the NEA's external communications strategies. All paid media must be designed to advance public education for all children, be crafted strategically to reach key audiences with a message empirically proven to persuade and motivate them, and be integrated with all other communications outreach, especially media relations, to enhance the impact.

G. COALITIONS - Recruiting Allies

The NEA is a frequent participant in coalitions as part of its historic commitment to social justice, and human and civil rights. Interviewees had conflicting evaluations about how the NEA has utilized its coalitional activities, but all agree that the Association has not sufficiently developed coalitions to make the NEA's case on issues critical to its future and that of public education.

We believe it is essential that the NEA help establish these coalitions on several fronts. In some cases, having third parties where purported self-interest is not an issue will greatly strengthen the credibility of the pro-public education position, and prevent the Association from harming its image by being out front alone on an issue of controversy and importance. In all cases, the Association is helped simply by increasing and mobilizing its allies - all of whom have a vital stake in the future of public education. In every case, this is an approach that the NEA should pursue with vigor.

H. POLITICS - Greater Sensitivity

The NEA is known and respected for its aggressive and successful political and government relations operations. But the high degree of publicity they have received over the

past two decades has created the image of an inside-the-beltway, highly partisan "800 pound gorilla" that gets in the way of the NEA's need to show itself as it truly is - an organization singularly focused on creating better teachers, better students, better public schools.

We don't want to mess with success, and so we have no significant substantive suggestions about how the NEA makes its members' voices heard in the political and legislative arenas. But we do think politics and government relations should take a lower media profile for a while, with the sole exceptions of occasions when the NEA endorses Republicans, and grassroots activity. The news media and the general public need to hear a lot more about what the NEA is doing in the classroom than what it is doing in the halls of Congress or the voting booth.

I. OTHER COMMUNICATIONS - Serving Strategic Objectives

The NEA conducts a variety of other external communications, including the "School Stories" television show, the NEA Broadcast Awards, the NEA web site on the Internet, and a wide range of videos and print materials. These are creatively done and well-produced, but now need to be reviewed to ensure each and every product supports the message, "Better teachers, better students, better public schools."

1. "School stories"

The consensus is that while the program gets low ratings, the cost is so minimal to the NEA because of The Learning Channel's financing that it is worth continuing. We agree. To have a show airing nationally - even on cable and outside of a highly rated time slot - is a rare resource. It adds credibility to the organization and videotapes of programs can always be distributed to key external and internal audiences.

2. Broadcast awards

This is another tremendous organizational resource, and our only recommendation is to try to get a little more bang for the buck. There should be an effort made to find a network sponsor - most likely cable - to broadcast the awards program, whether live or later on tape. Given that the program is in June after the sweeps month is over and most shows are in reruns, we think this is a possibility. To add to this prospect and increase the overall appeal, efforts should be made to "dress-up" the awards program from its current format. This may include finding a celebrity to host the program, and perhaps adding some big-name entertainment.

3. Radio

The NEA should explore creation of a weekly radio program on public education. In this burgeoning field, it is increasingly possible to get syndicated and build a national reach.

This could take the form of a debate show; "Talk back to talk radio," in which the host reviews all of the myths and misinformation put out in this genre; and "Teachers' talk" - individual teachers discuss the daily challenges of the classroom and what they mean for education policy and reforms.

4. Publications and video productions

As we stated earlier in the paper, we find NEA's print and video publications to be original and of high quality. Thus, we only have two suggestions for print publications. First, consider increasing the internal coordination in order to attain a unified look/design of the publications. Second, consistently focus on the "Better teachers..." campaign to ensure that the message is invariably included in each publication the NEA produces.

5. Web site

In our research, we discovered that the NEA web site has had a refreshing opportunity to be developed with minimal restraint. We would like to encourage this unfettered development process in order to ensure that the web site remains interesting and informative. In addition, we recommend that the web site also incorporate the "Better teachers, better students, better public schools" throughout its various sites.

J. AFFILIATE/MEMBER RELATIONS - Mobilizing Support

By all accounts, we believe the NEA can effectively begin to shape the debate about public education. It will not happen overnight or even in six months, but, with determination, it can happen. But to truly add muscle to this plan, the NEA needs to turn to its true strength: state and local affiliates and members. Let's face it, without them, NEA does not exist. They are the NEA's greatest asset.

There will be a need to communicate with and inform the membership about the "Better teachers..." campaign. We suggest doing this through the magazine, all other internal publications, creation of a brochure or handbook on the campaign, a possible video, and other means.

With regard to ESPs, we suggest sharply increasing direct internal communication - through all available vehicles - as a means of making them understand how much they are valued, and to help compensate for their lower visibility in external communications.

K. MERGER PROSPECTS - Some Thoughts

Perhaps the greatest "unknown" in this report is whether the NEA and the AFT will ultimately merge. Without commenting on the advisability of such a move, we have three recommendations related to merger prospects.

First, if a merger does transpire, a comprehensive, proactive communications strategy must be developed, tested and implemented in advance if the new entity is to build a positive image among its key audiences.

Second, given a diversity of perspectives on this subject among states, a similarly comprehensive effort among affiliates would be advisable in the event of a merger.

Third, whether or not a merger comes to pass, both the NEA and AFT could benefit from closer contact and coordination on their communications strategies, assuming that a mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship can be developed.

V. CONCLUSION

What is true in biology applies in other spheres as well - adaptability is the key to survival.

The NEA has known this throughout its 140-year history. Because from its founding until the mid-1980s, it adapted to meet challenges whenever they arose while staying true to its mission, to its members, and to its real constituency - America's schoolchildren.

But today, this is in question. From 1983 to 1996, as attacks on the NEA mounted, as extremists and others sought to dismantle the public schools, as the needs of members and the attitudes of the public changed, the Association largely remained the same. That is, until very recently. New initiatives at the national and especially the state levels signal the Association's recognition that it needs to change and its desire to renew this process of adaptation.

But something, we believe, is necessary to provide some direction and be a catalyst for this process. We hope our report serves this purpose.

Inertia is perhaps the single biggest obstacle to change for an organization the NEA's size. Changing to a crisis footing - which we believe is the *only* way the NEA can preserve itself and save the public schools, given the threats to both - is not easy and will not happen overnight.

We have designed a vehicle for turning the NEA into a crisis operation - a single, overarching campaign which we call "Better teachers, better students, better public schools."

It reflects the desire, clearly stated in interviews with leadership and staff, to move the NEA away from an industrial-style union and towards more of a craft union approach, in which the professional development of its members is as much or more of a priority than traditional bargaining objectives. It responds to public demands for action to improve public schools. And it addresses the needs of NEA members.

In this campaign, in related efforts, and in all other communications, the NEA must speak in clear, plain and compelling terms; achieve true message discipline; present teachers as the face of the Association; and always talk of every issue, every NEA position, in terms of its impact on *children*.

If the NEA adopts many of these recommendations - and if it makes this type of campaign the single, overarching focus not only of all external communications, but of its substantive operations as well - we believe the NEA will greatly improve its public image, it will gain the credibility needed to *initiate* (rather than respond to) education reforms, and it

will better serve its members. Most important, it will achieve the stated purpose of the "Better teachers, better students, better public schools" campaign - which is the NEA's true goal, its reason for being.

In doing so, the NEA will reassert its presence as one of the most vital and beneficial institutions in our society, keep its place in America's history books, and write a shining new chapter in the Association's own remarkable history. The people who make education their chosen profession - the noblest calling, yet one that often comes at inordinate sacrifice - and the nation's schoolchildren deserve nothing less.