

The new NEA: reinventing the teachers unions for a new era.

Address by BOB CHASE, President, National Education Association

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I appreciate that very kind introduction, Richard Sammon, reporter for Congressional Quarterly, president of the National Press Club. I came here this afternoon, to introduce the new National Education Association, the new union we are striving to create in public education. By way of preface, however, I'd like to speak not about our union per se, but about teachers and the teaching profession.

Teaching has always been more a calling than a career. Speaking from 25 years' experience in the classroom, I can testify: As a teacher, you never face an existential crisis about the meaning of your work. Because if you are a good teacher, you see it in your kids' faces, you see it in the fires you kindle in their minds, you see it in your students' gratitude when they come back to visit you years later.

But there is another side to teaching, a side that can be painful: The almost casual belittling and denigration of teachers that is all too commonplace in our society.

To take just one example: Several weeks ago, John Silber, former Boston University president and now chair of the Massachusetts Board of Education, said (and I quote): "We don't have the people going into the teaching profession that we used to. The women's movement, gave women alternatives more attractive than teaching. Before it was secretary, teacher, prostitute."

In the uproar that followed, Dr. Silber claimed to have been speaking in jest. But the damage was done.

And my point is this: I will be talking today about NEA's new ideas for lifting up teachers as professionals and boosting the quality of schools. But the fact is, that all our plans will come to naught if Americans do not honor the work of teachers, if Americans don't respect the incredibly difficult and important work that public school teachers do.

When I was young, I studied for a time at a seminary. And I faced a tough choice between the priesthood or a career in education. In large part because of all the terrific teachers I had when growing up, I chose teaching. And I have never regretted the choice.

I chose teaching for one reason: To make a difference for children. Likewise, last year, I campaigned for and was elected president of NEA for that same reason: To make a difference for children, but on a larger scale. By recreating, by fundamentally recreating, NEA as the champion of quality teaching and quality public schools in the United States.

Now, as we all know, the last several years have not been kind to newly elected leaders who come to Washington in the guise of revolutionaries. However, I am not shy about my plans to redirect our great Association in big ways. Nor am I naive about the magnitude of this challenge.

Bear in mind that, for nearly three decades now, the National Education Association has been a traditional, somewhat narrowly focused union. We have butted heads with management over bread-and-butter issues, to win better salaries, benefits, and working conditions for school employees. And we have succeeded.

Today, however, it is clear to me, and to a critical mass of teachers across America, that while this narrow, traditional agenda remains important, it is utterly inadequate to the needs of the future. It will not serve our members' interest in greater professionalism. It will not serve the public's interest in better quality public schools. And it will not serve the interests of America's children, the children we teach, the children who motivated us to go into teaching in the first place.

And this latter interest must be decisive. After all, America's public schools do not exist for teachers and other employees. They do not exist to provide us with jobs and salaries. Schools do exist for the children, to give students the very best, beginning with a quality teacher in every classroom.

Ladies and gentlemen, the imperative now facing public education could not be more stark: Simply put, in the decade ahead, we must revitalize our public schools from within, or they will be dismantled from without. And I am not talking here about the critics on talk radio who seek higher ratings by bashing public education and trashing teachers. I am talking about the vast majority of Americans who support public education, but are clearly dissatisfied. They want higher quality public schools, and they want them now.

Even in the many school districts across America that are already performing at high levels, and there are thousands of them, including, locally, Montgomery County, Maryland and Fairfax County, Virginia, even in these high-performance systems, the public is demanding that we do better. And given these expectations, I am convinced that school unions best serve their members by pursuing an aggressive agenda of excellence and reform in public education.

To this end, we aim not so much to redirect NEA, as to reinvent it. Yes, reinvention is a tall order. But we know we can do it, because we did it once before. In the 1960s, we took a rather quiet, genteel professional association of educators, and we reinvented it as an assertive, and, when necessary, militant, labor union.

But here is a critical point: When we reinvented our association in the 1960s, we modeled it after traditional, industrial unions. Likewise, we accepted the industrial premise: Namely, that labor and management have distinct, conflicting roles and interests, that we are destined to clash, that the union-management relationship is inherently adversarial.

Yes, these traditional industrial-style teacher unions have brought major improvements to public education: We have won smaller class sizes and better conditions for teaching and learning. We have also fought for decent salaries to attract and retain qualified teachers. And we have put our money where our mouth is when it comes to school reform. Over the past decade, NEA has spent some \$70 million on reform initiatives, most recently, sponsoring six charter schools across the country.

So, the National Education Association is a proud organization, proud of the major improvements we have won in public education. However, these gains have been inadequate. And, too often, they have been won through confrontation at the bargaining table or, in extreme cases, after bitter strikes.

Which brings me to the crux of my message, today. These industrial-style, adversarial tactics simply are not suited to the next stage of school reform. After much soul-searching and self-criticism within NEA, we know that it's time to create a new union, an association with an entirely new approach to our members, to our critics, and to our colleagues on the other side of the bargaining table. But to clear the air, I must publicly speak some rather blunt truths.

The fact is, that while the vast majority of teachers are capable and dedicated professionals, who put children's interests first, there are indeed some bad teachers in America's schools. And it is our job as a union to improve those teachers or, that failing, to get them out of the classroom.

The fact is that while some of NEA's critics aim only to dismantle public education, many others care deeply about our schools, and we have been too quick to dismiss their criticisms and their ideas for change.

The fact is that, in some instances, we have used our power to block uncomfortable changes, to protect the narrow interest of our members, and not to advance the interests of students and schools.

The fact is, that while NEA does not control curriculum, set funding levels, or hire and fire, we cannot go on denying responsibility for school quality. We can't wash our hands of it and say "that's management's job." School quality, the quality of the environment where students learn and where our members work, must be our responsibility as a union.

The fact is that, while the majority of NEA members teach in successful, for the most part suburban, schools, we have been wrong to ignore the plight of inner-city schools. And to rectify this wrong, we have convened an Emergency Commission on Urban Children to put NEA foursquare in the fight to save urban children and their schools.

The fact is that, too often, NEA has sat on the sidelines of change, nay saying, quick to say what won't work and slow to say what will. It is time for our great association to lead the reform, to engineer change, to take the initiative, to be in the vanguard.

And, on that score, the fact is, that no group knows more about the solutions that will work in our schools than America's teachers. We know what our schools need: higher academic standards; stricter discipline; an end to social promotions; less bureaucracy; more resources where they count, in the classroom; schools that are richly connected to parents and to the communities that surround them.

To an amazing degree, teachers, school boards, and administrators all agree on this reform agenda. And this commonality cries out for us to build an entirely new union management relationship in public education.

Our challenge is clear: Instead of relegating teachers to the role of production workers, with no say in organizing their schools for excellence, we need to enlist teachers as full partners, indeed, as co-managers of their schools. Instead of contracts that reduce flexibility and restrict change, we, and our schools, need contracts that empower and enable.

Many traditionalists within NEA, predictably, have difficulty accepting this new unionism. They say that what I propose is a threat to union clout and solidarity. To which I give a direct answer: This new collaboration is not about sleeping with the enemy. It is about waking up to our shared stake in reinvigorating the public education enterprise. It is about educating children better, more effectively, more ambitiously.

Permit me to add a personal note, here. I well understand the traditional union view, the view that says a union's job is strictly, quote-unquote "to look out for me." I understand it because I once held this view myself.

In 1983, after the Nation at Risk report came out, NEA President Mary Hatwood Futrell tried to mobilize our union to lead the reform movement in American public education. At the time, as a member of NEA's executive committee, I took a leading role in opposing her. I argued that we should stick to our knitting, stick to bargaining for better pay and working conditions.

That, ladies and gentlemen, was the biggest mistake of my career. I was wrong. And today, with all due respect, I say to the traditionalists in NEA's ranks, to those who argue that we should stick to our knitting, leaving education reform to others: You are mistaken.

I also say, I insist, that the new course we have charted at NEA is not strictly about vision. As British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said long ago: "If you want a vision, consult a saint. I am a politician." And so it is with me. I am a teacher whose heart and soul are still in the classroom; I still instinctively check for chalk smudges on my clothes. I am also a committed unionist; a veteran of more hard-fought collective bargaining sessions than I can remember. I deal in practical, concrete, tangible changes. I deal in results.

The new direction we are charting at NEA is not only about vision, it is about action. It is about changing how each of our local affiliates does business, changing how they bargain, changing

what issues they put on the table, changing the ways they help their members to become the best teachers they can be.

I repeat, the new NEA is about action. And, on that score, I challenge the American public: Watch what we do, not what we say.

Our new directions are clear: Putting issues of school quality front and center at the bargaining table, collaborating actively with management on an agenda of school reform, involving teachers and other school employees in organizing their schools for excellence.

The good news is that teachers on the front line are already advancing this agenda. They are way ahead of NEA's leadership. Indeed, my motto as NEA president should be: I am their leader, I must follow them.

For example, imagine a future where teachers, under their union contract, have responsibility for nearly three-quarters of a school system's budget, and they use that authority to cut class sizes and boost academic quality. Well, that future is now. I just described the work of our local union in New Albany, Indiana.

Imagine a 21st century school district where the teachers throw out the traditional contract entirely, and replace it with a joint labor-management "constitution," an agreement that allows teachers, in effect, to co-manage the school district. Utopian speculation? Hardly. Our affiliate in Glenview, Illinois has been operating under such an agreement since 1989.

Or, imagine the president of a local NEA union taking the lead in founding a public charter school, a new school that she and her colleagues manage by themselves, without a principal. I just described the work of Jan Noble, president of our affiliate in Colorado Springs.

By any measure, these are bold new arrangements. But a growing number of NEA teachers insist on going one step further. They argue that it's not enough to cooperate with management on school reform. Quality must begin at home, within our own ranks. If a teacher is not measuring up in the classroom, to put it boldly, if there is a bad teacher in one of our schools, then we must do something about it.

To the traditional unionists who say that this is heresy, a threat to union solidarity, I say: Come visit our NEA local in Columbus, Ohio. The Columbus Education Association designates senior teachers to serve as full-time consultants in the classroom. They intervene to help veteran teachers whose skills need sharpening. In most cases, this intervention is successful. But in roughly 10 percent of cases, the consultants, members of our union, take the lead in counseling a problem teacher to leave the profession, and, if necessary, they recommend dismissal.

This is courageous work, work that entails real political risk for teacher leaders within their local unions. I believe it is exactly the right course for the new NEA.

And while I'm on the subject of teacher professionalism, I'd like to use this occasion to announce that NEA has entered into a partnership with Stetson University to play a major role in the new Celebration Teaching Academy. This remarkable academy will be part of Walt Disney Company's new town of Celebration, Florida, and it will work hand in hand with the local public school. It will be for educators what a teaching hospital is for doctors: A place where teachers from around the nation can come to sharpen their skills and be exposed to "best practices." NEA professionals on site will help to shape the curriculum and to direct the academy's Master Teacher Institute. And we'll have other partners in this venture as well, including Johns Hopkins, Auburn, Harvard, and the University of Minnesota.

As you can imagine, we are delighted to play a major role in this important project. Indeed, the Celebration Teaching Academy is exactly what the new NEA is all about: A commitment to lifting up teachers as professionals and to revitalizing public education.

This commitment is good for children. What's more, as I have argued today, it is also tough-minded unionism, looking out for the enlightened self-interest of our members, responding to their demands for a union that cares deeply about quality.

At the end of the 19th century, labor pioneer Samuel Gompers famously stated the goal of his union in one word: "More!" Today, entering a new era, teachers are setting forth another goal for their unions: Better!

So let me state categorically what NEA will do:

To parents and the public, NEA pledges to work with you to ensure that every classroom in America has a quality teacher. This means we accept our responsibility to assist in removing teachers, that small minority of teachers, who are unqualified, incompetent, or burned out.

To the business community, NEA pledges to work with you to raise and enforce standards for student achievement, to ensure that high school graduates are, at a minimum, literate, competent in the basic skills, equipped for the workplace.

To President Clinton and the Congress, we at NEA pledge our enthusiastic support for the extraordinary agenda, a truly 21st century agenda for children and education, set forth in last night's State of the Union address.

To school boards and administrators, NEA pledges to engage you in a new partnership, at the bargaining table and in our day-to-day relationship aimed at transforming the quality of our schools.

And to those who seek genuinely to reform public education and not to dismantle it, NEA pledges to join with you to challenge the entrenched system, to fight for the changes that we know are urgent and necessary.

These are our pledges.

Finally, permit me a closing thought about my colleagues in the teaching profession. I dare say that everyone listening to me, today, has been changed for the better by teachers. Some, including me, have had their entire lives turned around by inspired teachers.

I began my remarks by quoting John Silber on teachers. For sake of balance, I'd like to share a passage from Pat Conroy's *Prince of Tides*. Many of you will remember that the book's main character, Tom, is an English teacher and high school football coach. Toward the end of the book, his sister argues with him, and she accuses him of being a failure. She says, "You sold yourself short. You could've been more than a teacher and a coach."

To which Tom replies: "Listen to me. There's no word in the English language I revere more than teacher. None. My heart sings when a kid refers to me as his teacher and it always has. I've honored myself and the entire family by becoming one."

Ladies and gentlemen, every time I read that passage, my heart sings.

It expresses the respect I feel for America's teachers, and especially for the exceptional teacher-leaders we have throughout our ranks in the National Education Association.

Because of their leadership, their dedication, I have absolute confidence that we can build the new NEA I have described for you this afternoon.

What's more, I have absolute confidence that this new NEA can be a driving force, I hope the driving force, in revitalizing public education for America's children.