

The Truth About NEA

The NEA Response to its Critics

Introduction

NEA, the nation's leading advocate for children and public education, is the largest and most diverse educational organization in the world. Our members embrace a wide range of religious, political and philosophical beliefs. Enriched by 3.2 million members, 50 state associations and more than 14,000 local affiliates, NEA has been able to develop a strong, united organizational policy. We're an inspiring example of what happens when schools, educators, parents and communities join forces to provide great public schools for all students.

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

NEA has re-written this booklet (formerly called Deceptions) to provide our members and potential members with timely, well-thought-out responses to the most frequent criticisms being leveled at NEA. It's our way of ensuring that despite all the allegations, all the untruths, NEA always has and always will speak for itself.

Deception 1	NEA wants to keep parents and communities out of schools. The association does not believe in family values.
Truth	NEA encourages parental and community involvement in public schools.

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

NEA works closely with a number of parent organizations, including the National PTA and the National Coalition for Parental Involvement in Education, that are diligent about building strong family-school-community partnerships. The Association has distributed hundreds of publications on the importance of these alliances and the need for innovative programs to support them. NEA also co-sponsors American Education Week with the National PTA, the American 3 Legion and the U.S. Department of Education. This event celebrates educators and the work they do in the classroom.

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

Deception 2	NEA opposes parental choice and is out to destroy charter, private and parochial schools.
Truth	NEA supports schools that are held to the same standards of accountability and access as traditional public schools.

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

NEA opposes any federal legislation, laws, or regulations that provide funds, goods, or services to sectarian schools that are not accountable to public authorities or bound by the law. According to a number of national studies, students attending many charter schools face less experienced teachers and get weaker instructional support. A number of charter schools have had serious legal problems, poor academic track records and problems staying open.

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

Deception 3	NEA encourages curriculum that promotes homosexuality and supports hiring preferences for homosexual teachers.
Truth	NEA believes that schools should be safe for all students and teachers regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The Association opposes discrimination against any group of students or employees.

NEA does not encourage schools to teach students to become gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT). But the Association believes schools should raise awareness of homophobia and that they should intervene when GLBT students are harassed. Across the nation, GLBT students experience higher rates of verbal and physical abuse that affect their health, school attendance and participation and academic achievement. The Association also believes school personnel should receive appropriate training and resource materials regarding GLBT youth in order to create and maintain a learning environment that's free of harassment and discrimination. This can be done by raising awareness of anti-GLBT bias in age-appropriate ways and by teaching students to respect their differences.

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

Deception 4	NEA encourages student sexual activity. (NEA encourages students to be sexually active.)
Truth	NEA does not support sex education programs that encourage student sexual activity.

Instead, the Association supports comprehensive health education, including sex education, as long as these programs include parental involvement and orientation, allow for developmental

needs and are sensitive to community values. These programs must also be age appropriate and respect the differences of others. The Association passed a resolution that supports "family planning counseling and access to birth control methods with instruction in their use" as long as these services are "deemed appropriate by local choice."

Deception 5	NEA favors banning all guns and disarming citizens.
Truth	NEA supports common sense limits on the use and distribution of certain kinds of guns -- including handguns and semiautomatic rifles.

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

Each day in the U.S., eight children die from gun violence and at least 35 suffer from firearm-related injuries. NEA does not believe the public should be able to purchase automatic and semiautomatic paramilitary weapons and seeks to control the sale of low-cost handguns used specifically to injure and kill. But the Association believes that limiting access to weapons is only part of a good school safety strategy. Communicating with parents and collaborating with community groups and law enforcement agencies will also help keep kids and schools safe.

Deception 6	NEA supports abortion.
Truth	NEA supports reproductive freedom without government intervention.

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

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

Here's an interesting fact: While NEA has spent tens of thousands of dollars defending the rights of its members to choose childbirth over abortion, it has not spent one penny under its legal services program defending their right to have an abortion.

Deception 7	NEA is anti-religious and opposes voluntary school prayer.
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Truth	NEA does not believe that schools should be "religion-free zones" and fully supports the broad religious freedoms currently enjoyed by students who attend public school, including the right to voluntary school prayer.

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

But there are limits, says NEA. Schools should not officially sponsor or promote sectarian activities and teachers should not use their classrooms to proselytize or impose their personal religious beliefs. NEA members worship in churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. The Association wants to ensure this type of diversity is respected and protected and that educators are fully informed to the constitutional and education principles involved in protecting First Amendment rights. While NEA agrees the study of religion has a broad impact on society and should be included in public school curriculum, the Association cautions that the approach used should be academic, not devotional. Through its partnership with the National Council of Churches, NEA will continue to explore ways in which the faith-based community and the education community can join together to support high quality public education for all.

Deception 8	NEA members who become involved in politics are unprofessional.
Truth	NEA encourages its members to become effective advocates for students by participating in politics.

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

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

Decep	NEA policy is determined by a small clique of union leaders who are far to the left of
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tion 9	the Association's membership-at-large.
Truth	NEA policy is determined by its 9,000- plus member Representative Assembly.

NEA policy is determined by its Representative Assembly. The Association's 2.7 million members select the RA delegates who meet each year (the first week in July) to set policy, decide on a budget, elect officers, and propose new business for NEA. The RA is the largest democratic deliberative body of its kind in the world and boasts more delegates than the Republican and Democratic conventions combined. When NEA's Board of Directors and the Association's Executive Committee act, they're enforcing the policies approved by the RA. There's no basis to the claim that NEA policy is far to the left of its membership. Members determine NEA policy.

Deception 10	Educators are forced to join NEA.
Truth	Membership in NEA is entirely voluntary. No one can be forced to join.

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

Deception 11	NEA encourages teachers to go out on strike.
Truth	The decision to strike can only be made by education employees in local affiliates who feel they have exhausted all other efforts to resolve their differences with school administrators.

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

Deception 12	NEA protects incompetent teachers.
Truth	NEA wants a qualified teacher in every classroom.

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

Complaints that NEA uses tenure to protect incompetent teachers are ill founded and inaccurate. All tenure laws provide for the removal of ineffective teachers who are unwilling or unable to teach. While the Association supports due process in cases involving the dismissal, transfer or demotion of employees, it also promotes the use of peer assistance and mentoring programs to improve the profession, retain promising teachers and maintain high standards of teaching.

NEA is opposed to schemes like the one being offered by the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence. The ABCTE program allows candidates who have not worked with young people and who have not successfully completed an internship in their field, to receive a license that qualifies them to teach. Instead, NEA supports the more rigorous certification program offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards that encourages teachers with at least three years of classroom experience to reflect on what techniques work, how they can improve and how they can share this information with others in their profession.

Deception 13	NEA is against the use of scientifically approved reading programs.
Truth	NEA believes there is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning.

It makes sense to consider scientific research when making decisions about curriculum and instruction. But NEA is concerned that government policy-makers are limiting access to the full range of relevant research related to learning and instruction and that they are exercising too much control over the techniques educators are allowed to use.

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

Deception 14	NEA is no longer a professional organization and is more concerned about teachers than kids.
Truth	NEA exists to improve the quality of public education and serve the needs of its members.

The two go hand-in-hand. The Association knows that the quality of education our teachers deliver is linked to their working conditions. NEA seeks to enhance the professionalism of education employees by providing them with opportunities to develop their skills and improve their teaching techniques. NEA also advocates for the kind of employment rights, economic benefits and working conditions that they as professionals deserve. For this reason, NEA spends

a comparable amount of money advocating for qualified teachers in every classroom, improving reading skills, promoting school construction and modernization, building bipartisan support for public education and advocating for safe and orderly schools.

Deception 15	NEA opposes teacher competency testing.
Truth	NEA supports the fair and unbiased testing of all applicants entering the teaching profession. It also supports the ongoing assessment of all teachers through a scheduled, comprehensive evaluation process.

NEA is not opposed to testing entry-level teachers to ensure their competency in both content and teaching skills. But it believes it is unfair and shortsighted to use a written test as the single means of determining a veteran teacher's competency or as a condition of employment, license retention, evaluation, placement, ranking or promotion. No other profession tests practitioners after they have been hired. The ability to pass a test should be only one of several methods used to evaluate and identify effective teachers.

Testing, in and of itself, won't produce a high quality teacher in every classroom, a goal NEA strongly supports. NEA believes that the best tools for achieving that goal are better teacher preparation programs, tighter enforcement of licensing requirements, mentoring, performancebased evaluations, professional development programs and adequate compensation. Teachers also need time during the regular workday to study, research, reflect and collaborate with colleagues.

Deception 16	NEA fights measures that hold schools accountable for how well students learn and achieve. It is the greatest stumbling block to the education reform movement.
Truth	NEA supports the goals of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act)- high standards and high expectations for every student and educator. But it rejects ESEA's notion that high-stakes testing is the only adequate measure of academic success and opposes the law's punitive impact on the Title I schools and students who need the most help.

For the past two years, NEA and others have argued that this law is seriously flawed. The Association is concerned that requiring schools to conduct annual exams in reading and math forces teachers to take valuable time away from instruction in order to prep students for these high-stakes tests. It also leads to cutbacks in other subjects such as art, music, foreign languages and social studies. We worry about a law that punishes schools that do not make "adequate yearly progress" by taking away their federal funding and that requires school districts to pay to transfer students to higher-achieving schools that may already be overcrowded.

NEA also believes that ESEA is a one-size fits-all law that fails to take into account the reality that some children learn in different ways. NEA recognizes that this law pushes schools to spend more money on what they don't need -- more bureaucracy, paperwork and standardized testing. The federal aid promised by the Bush administration and Congress falls \$27 billion short of that

promised when ESEA became law in 2002. This law has imposed additional costs on states and localities already struggling to stay afloat financially. According to a General Accounting Office report, states will collectively spend \$5.3 billion over the next five years in an effort to comply with NCLB's testing mandates.

NEA knows what really works for all children: smaller classes, teacher training, updated textbooks and materials, increased parental involvement and early childhood and after school programs. The Association's Priority School Initiative is a proven model for transforming low-performing schools. NEA also proposed giving tax credits to teachers in low-performing schools and supports the advanced teacher training program offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. NEA supports Congressional bills for tax credits for teachers in high priority schools.

NEA and its affiliates are working hard to fix and fund the national education law. They have conducted hearings nationwide on ESEA's impact. The Association's "Great Public Schools For Every Child Act," introduced to Congress during the summer of 2003, has spawned at least 26 NEA-endorsed bills sponsored or cosponsored by 190 members of Congress. Within the past year, 34 state legislatures expressed their displeasure over the federal education law: 28 wanted more funding, eight asked for fiscal feasibility studies, four refused to spend state money to implement ESEA and six considered "opting-out" of the law's requirements.

Many other organizations, including those representing school administrators and school boards share many of NEA's views concerning ESEA/NCLB.

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

NEA believes the future of public education is linked to the achievement levels of all students -- regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, language or socioeconomic status. Yet 50 years after the Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal public education for minority students is unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education*), learning disparities based on race and income still plague our nation's schools. The Association believes the current gaps in achievement shown by certain groups are totally unacceptable, especially in a country that has the intellectual and financial resources to ensure equality and equity for all students.

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

NEA realizes that achievement gaps will not end until lawmakers invest more money and remove punitive sanctions against schools that show progress but still fall short of meeting ESEA's performance goals. The Association also believes the best way to close the gaps is to fund more school improvement, improve teacher quality, recruit and retain and train more teachers and para educators, push for smaller class sizes, up-to-date books and materials and

adequate and equitable funding. NEA also promotes respecting and protecting the human and civil rights of all students and partnering with organizations representing the interests of these "learning gap" students.

Deception 18	NEA encourages immorality among students by opposing the censorship of "offensive" books and materials.
Truth	NEA supports efforts to teach critical thinking skills to our nation's students. Tests are only one measure of a student's overall success. NEA believes children should be able to analyze what they read and determine its impact on individuals and society. Helping students gain these skills is an important part of the education process. It allow students to value differences, be receptive to new ideas and develop better communication skills.

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

Deception 19	NEA illegally distributes millions of dollars in mandatory dues payments to candidates and political parties -- without the consent of its members.
Truth	The money NEA uses to support political candidates comes from a separate, segregated campaign fund.

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

Deception 20	NEA is committed to electing only Democrats to public office.
Truth	NEA recommends that its members support pro-education candidates without regard to their political affiliation.

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