



# NEBRASKA NEA Director's Report

Jenni Absalon [jenni.absalon@nsea.org](mailto:jenni.absalon@nsea.org) • John Heineman [jheine@lps.org](mailto:jheine@lps.org) • Rebecca Marks [rebeccamarks@gmail.com](mailto:rebeccamarks@gmail.com)

## October 2012

### In This Issue

- A Culture of Organizing
- What is Organizing?
- Board Business
- Lobbying on Capitol Hill for Public Education Issues
- Education Votes
- Observances



### Welcome Back to the NEA Board, Rebecca Marks

*Rebecca was elected as an Alternate At Large ESP board member. She has now been appointed for one year for another director who resigned.*



NEA's website is packed with valuable information. Apply for grants, take classes, get lesson plans, read the latest research, and much more.

[Click Here for NEA's Website](#)

### Flat Sunday Visits Washington D.C.

I was honored to be chosen by a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student to take his Flat Sunday with me to visit D.C. He is in LEA member Kathy Horejsi's class. I received a letter from the real Sunday who described the project to me in detail. I had done several Flat Stanley projects through the years in my classroom, as well as participated as a parent and a volunteer travel partner. If you aren't familiar with the project, it is based on the Flat Stanley character from Jeff Brown's series. [Click Here](#)

This is a description from the Flat Stanley website:

*The basic principle of The Flat Stanley Project is to connect your child, student or classroom with other children or classrooms participating in the Project by sending out "flat" visitors, created by the children, through the mail (or digitally, with The Flat Stanley app). Kids then talk about, track, and write about their flat character's journey and adventures. Although similar to a pen-pal activity, Flat Stanley is actually much more enriching-students don't have to wonder where to begin or what to write about. The sender and the recipient already have a mutual friend, Flat Stanley.*



I enjoyed taking Flat Sunday around D.C. I was stopped several times by parents and children commenting on his adventure. It was an awesome way to talk to folks about the project and public schools. I am having a good time making a PowerPoint and scrapbook to send to the real Sunday to share with his class.  
Jenni Absalon

## A Culture of Organizing

Board tackles challenge of making NEA responsive and relevant to members

*"We've got to find a way to increase membership in these lean times,"*

**-Dennis Van Roekel, NEA president**



NEA's quest to redefine itself opened a new chapter at the Oct. 5-6 board of directors meeting. With political attacks and membership losses chipping away at the association's very foundation, leaders took the first step toward rebuilding by committing to the principles of organizing.

"What does it mean to have a culture of organizing?" asked John Stocks, NEA's executive director, as he addressed the board.

Answers to this question reverberated throughout the two-day meeting as speaker after speaker talked about their personal experience with organizing and its importance to building a strong union.

"We need a critical mass of membership who care about the same idea," said Jim Testerman, senior director of the NEA Center for Organizing. "In far too many cases, public education employees are not passionate about us."

Testerman encouraged the board to stop trying to "sell" membership on the basis of insurance and protection and instead convince people to join a unified movement based on NEA's core values and mission. Organizing is the key to actually achieving NEA's goal of creating great public schools for every student in America, he said.

Stocks reemphasized NEA's commitment to social justice at the RA this summer in Washington D.C., and he came back to those same ideas while addressing the board of directors.

"What we do will look different in an organizing culture," he said. "How we do things will look different, but our core values and mission aren't changing unless you guys decide to change them."

Stocks emphasized NEA's core values: equal opportunity, a just society, democracy, partnership, professionalism, and collective action. And he concluded his presentation with NEA's mission: "to advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world."

But the work ahead of NEA will not be easy.

"We need to stop talking about moving to an organizing culture and just organize," said Testerman. "We want to brand NEA as the folks that organize better than anyone else."

Board members agreed.

**George Sheridan**, a director from California, said he learned to organize from Fred Ross and Cesar Chavez. In organizing farm workers into a powerful union, Ross and Chavez used house meetings, Sheridan said. "I've been to hundreds of these meetings and have always come out with some success." These leaders were very open to a diverse group of leaders with different ideas. They melded the civil rights and faith movements and took organizing tools from all of them, whether it was vigils, fasts, marches, or sit-ins. "Let's learn from these groups the things that they use and make them part of our power," Sheridan said.

**Maury Koffman**, a director from Michigan, said NEA needs to make stronger connections with members at the

local level. "We must be relevant," he said. "Until we connect with what those values are, we won't be able to get them engaged." He encouraged directors to share their own organizational techniques. "I believe that a relevant union is what makes us strong."

**Jeffery "JJ" Johnson**, a director from Wisconsin, talked specifically about lobbying politicians. When he visited his representatives in Congress, one of them said to him, "You guys aren't lobbyists. You actually believe in what you say. You are advocates." Johnson said there is a perception among some that NEA is organizing to perpetuate the status quo. To combat this, Johnson started a book group at his school, where he and his colleagues read, "*Teaching with Poverty in Mind*," by **Eric Jensen**. The perceptions of his colleagues about what it means to work with underprivileged children changed. "I'm not interested in doing things the way that we have always done them," he said.

**Kari Overall**, the lone director from Idaho, said, "One of the greatest obstacles we face is ourselves." She talked about the cliques that sometimes form within leadership that has a tendency to exclude people. "We forget to actually become their friend and get to know them," she said. "We have to figure out what resonates with our members."

**Tripp Jeffers**, a director from North Carolina, said "This is precisely what democracy is." He said there is a lot of resistance to organizing and that it's the job of leaders to help groups get past that. In addition, he said that recruiting members has to be everyone's job. "Membership has to be all of our jobs, or we won't have a job," he said.

**Lawrence Garcia**, a director from Colorado, said NEA needs to develop a plan to organize. Members feel overwhelmed and being asked to do mandates without any help. NEA should provide structure, opportunities and models, he said. "Our greatest obstacle may be our greatest opportunity."

**Stephen Miller**, a director from Washington, said NEA needs more full-time or part-time release presidents to help facilitate the organizing. These "mid-level" managers need to be available during the day to set up, arrange and follow-up on meetings. "We can't rely on members to do all of this at 9:30 at night," he said. "We need to grow the release time."

**Alicia Bata**, the lone director from North Dakota, said that NEA members are way too nice. There is a resistance to being too pushy, she said. "It may not be North Dakota nice to get involved, but how is it North Dakota nice to let others do the work for you?" she asked. Bata is from Argentina and said joining unions is expected there. She joined immediately when she came to the U.S., she said.

**Jamie Zartler**, a director from Oregon, said that NEA must give its members hope. Members will fight for improvements and work harder if they think there is a chance for improvements. "We have to provide some hope that through the power we'll develop (through organizing) that things will get easier and things will get better," he said.

Still other board members talked about the importance of involving parents and parent-teacher organization in NEA's efforts to improve public schools. Many others also noted the challenges that revolve around recruiting new members and different techniques to make that happen.

**Sarah Patton**, a director from Virginia, said that in her local the pitch they use is, "join because it's your professional association and we need to stand together."

## What Is Organizing?

**John Stocks**, NEA's executive director, has spent his entire career organizing. And in just over a year as NEA's top staffer, Stocks has helped reshape NEA and put organizing at the center of everything the organization does. Repositioning staff in the face of diminishing membership was a daunting task. The new staff arrangement emphasizes "leading the profession" with **Bill Raabe**, organizing with **Jim Testerman**, advocacy and politics with **Kim Anderson**, communications with **Ramona Oliver**, and leadership with **Daaiyah Bilal-Threats**. However, the next step in creating an organizing culture is educating members about what organizing looks like and how to do it. Of course, many members and leaders decided to get involved because they come naturally to organizing, but not all. During a discussion by the board of directors, some directors admitted they were nervous about the shift to organizing. Some said that they had become involved because they were good at bargaining, contract enforcement, or even as budget experts.

Stocks laid the groundwork for organizing by explaining that it comes in many forms. In a discussion with the board on Oct. 6, he used the following bullets to make his point:

**Collective Bargaining:** Acting together to advance change. "We need to ask ourselves at every turn, does this

benefit most of us? Does this move toward healthy jobs for our members?" Stocks said. "Power is a very important thing that we should embrace. Power when it's in the hands of democratic organizations is healthy and good for our country. We exercise it in the name of people who are less powerful."

**Direct Action:** This is all about speaking truth to power. Stocks explained that NEA has often thought of this as school boards. Direct action may still be needed in this area to defend a grievance, but in the current world it includes Living Wage Campaigns and other endeavors. It also means partnering with groups with similar interests possibly fighting against Wealthy Corporate Interests intent on dismantling government or fighting against restrictive voter ID laws.

**Values Based:** Things that align with NEA's core values are worth fighting for. "These values govern our work as an organizing union," Stocks said. In the 1970's, NEA organized around collective bargaining, and now it's time to test whether NEA can organize around professionalism, disadvantaged students and communities, and other social justice issues, he said.

**Relational Organizing:** The heart of organizing is one-on one conversation. "We need to do this more often and we need to do it across the organization at all levels," Stocks said. "It is critical to not talk about what is keeping us different, but what joins us together as one union." This fits strongly with the idea of recruiting new members. Stocks said that it's important to talk to potential members about why it's important to join the NEA. "Our members like relationships and working together," he said.

**Partnerships:** We must work with other stakeholders. "We can't wait until bargaining is tough, and then ask," Stocks said. "We must work now together with allies and strategic partners." He defined those partners as groups that share NEA's values and interest in a just society.

**Leaders:** Those who understand and practice organizing and who serve the organization in any leadership capacity (building reps, local and state leaders and political activists). "We will never be an organizing union if we rely solely on staff to do our organizing," he said. "We must cultivate and develop these leaders who are organizing break room gatherings and afterschool potlucks to talk about the benefits of unions." Stocks said NEA must encourage this type of leadership and reward them with opportunities for continued personal growth and the chance to showcase their skills and abilities. "Many of you are leaders because you experienced making a difference in the life of a colleague or student," Stocks said. "It's contagious. It certainly is for me. It is an electrifying feeling."

**Reciprocal Accountability:** Honest evaluation of our work to determine whether it is successful or not. "We need to hold each other to the truth of the matter," he said.

**New tools and ideas:** The use of data, communications, research, campaign planning, training and leadership development to improve organizing. "We will revolutionize communications," Stocks said. "We're doing values proposition research that will tell us why members join. We will do training of staff and leaders."

**Issues you choose:** Organizing is about finding issues that are relevant to the people in your school or work site. "The strategy you use to select is critically important," Stocks said. Areas that often are chosen include: health care, respect, student safety, professionalism, collaboration, and innovation.

**Social Justice Unionism:** Organizing around issue of social justice. Stocks spoke about this topic at the RA in Washington D.C. in July. "The organizer walks side by side with the social justice patriot," he said.

## Board Business

### Fighting against ballot initiative--

The NEA board of directors voted to approve three motions involving large sums of money at the Oct. 5-6 meeting. The board approved a motion to spend up to \$2.8 million from the Ballot Measure Crisis Fund for the purpose of fighting ballot initiative proposals in four states. Idaho will receive up to \$1.24 million, Michigan \$900,000, Florida \$500,000, and South Dakota, \$160,000.

In addition, the board voted to spend \$250,000 to fight a charter school initiative in Washington state. This appropriation couldn't come from the crisis fund because laws in Washington State prevent expenditures from such accounts. Also, the board approved just under \$100,000 to be spent out of the contingency fund to pay for the items passed at the RA that were not already included in the budget. The amount needed to cover new business items from the Washington DC RA in July was one of the smallest amounts in years.

### Miami is out, Orlando is in for RA 2015---

Plans are moving ahead to hold the 2013 Representative Assembly in Atlanta and the 2014 RA in Denver; however plans to visit Miami in 2015 have fallen through.

Instead, the 2015 RA is now scheduled for another popular Florida tourist destination-Orlando. NEA evaluated bids from five cities, and Orlando beat out Anaheim, Denver, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles.

Miami offered an attractive bid 10 years ago, but in discussions late last year it became apparent that Miami would not be able to meet NEA's requirements for convention facilities, hotel capacity, and hotel rates.

After Orlando, future RAs are planned in the following cities: 2016-Washington D.C., 2017-Boston, 2018-Minneapolis, and 2019-Houston.

### **Nominations available for awards**

NEA is soliciting nominations for the 2013 Human and Civil Rights Awards. NEA traditionally hands out 12 awards at the celebration which accompanies the Representative Assembly.

The awards include: the Applegate-Dorros award, the Carter G. Woodson award, the Cesar Chavez award, the Ellison S. Onizuka award, the George I. Sanchez award, the H. Council Trenholm award, the Leo Reano award, the Martin Luther King Jr. award, the Mary Hatwood Futrell award, the Reg Weaver award, the Rosena J. Willis award, and the Virginia Uribe award.

The deadline for submission is Dec. 10.

### **National trainings planned this Spring**

Despite the cancellation of regional leadership conferences, NEA will continue to hold traditional trainings and conferences in the spring of 2013. In addition, plans are underway to revamp leadership training with West and East summits in the spring of 2014.

As a possible prelude to the West and East idea, the **Minority Leadership Training** and the **Women's Leadership Training** will be presented in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Jan. 25-27 and then in Tampa, Florida, on Feb. 22-24.

### **Nominations open for special dialogue**

NEA will hold a special "Dialogue on Social Justice" on Dec. 7 and 8 in Washington D.C.

The dialogue is the result of **New Business Item D**, which was passed at the Representative Assembly in July. The goal of the meeting is to reclaim NEA's standing as a social justice advocate and leader.

The group will discuss social justice issues facing students and communities of color, ethnic minority members, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) students of color. In addition, the dialogue should help NEA continue to ensure diversity within the organization and activate minority leaders.

**NEA members can nominate themselves or others, but they must do so before Oct. 26.**

**To make a nomination go to the website: <http://surveymonkey.com/s/SocJustice>.**

## **Observances**

### **Activist speaks out on Natives' issues**

**Laura Harris**, the executive director of Americans for Indian Opportunity spoke to the NEA board of directors on Oct. 6 as part of the American Indian and Alaska Native Observance.

Although Natives have not, historically, had significant power in the United States, Harris would like to change that. "Luckily we're seeing a strong Native American vote movement," she said. In 2004 America started to see an increase in Native voter registration and running for office.

Harris quoted Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, who relied heavily on the Native vote when she ran a successful write-in campaign for the U.S. Senate in 2010. Murkowski's campaign was only the second successful write-in campaign ever for the Senate.

Harris read Murkowski's remarks from a 2011 event in Washington D.C. "If ever you wonder whether Native vote works, look no further than Lisa Murkowski. My success in running the history making write-in campaign that I ran last November would not have been possible if Alaska's Native people did not turn out at the polls. I deeply appreciate the trust that Alaska's Native people have placed in me."

## Lobbying / Government Relations

**Congress was on recess until after the election however NEA Directors John Heineman, Jenni Absalon, Rebecca Marks and NSEA Vice President Leann Wildhalm spent the day meeting with Nebraska's elected representatives' staff on Capitol Hill.**

**The NEA Directors attend a lobbying briefing before heading to meet with Nebraska's Representatives. The topics of discussion for the visits are below in red, with talking points under each area of concern.**

### **Lame Duck Session: Deficit Reduction/Spending Cuts/Revenues**

**Oppose any additional cuts to non-defense discretionary programs like education as part of a deficit reduction deal.**

**Sequestration would be particularly devastating for education, where cuts would result in:**

- Services cut or eliminated for more than nine million students
- Class sizes ballooning
- After-school programs gone
- Title I, special education, and Head Start slashed by billions combined
- Programs for our most vulnerable - homeless students, English Language Learners, and high-poverty, struggling schools - decimated
- Financial aid for college students slashed
- Nearly **80,000 education jobs lost** - at early childhood, elementary and secondary, and postsecondary levels.

**Deficit reduction and a strong economy by allowing the Bush tax cuts to expire for those earning over \$250,000 ensuring everyone pays his or her fair share. It is time to start making our tax code fair to average people who work hard and play by the rules. To get our nation back on track, we need everyone to do their part-and ending the Bush tax cuts for the richest two percent and closing corporate tax loopholes are good first steps.**

- People who earn more than \$1 million a year get an average tax break of \$143,000 from the Bush-era tax cuts, while people making about \$50,000 a year get an average tax break of about \$1,000. (*Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, Individual Income and Estate Tax Provisions in the 2001-10 Tax Cuts, Table T11-0209, 7/5/2011, p. 1*).
- Nearly 1,500 people who made more than a million dollars paid no federal income taxes in 2009. (*National Economic Council, The Buffett Rule: A Basic Principle of Tax Fairness, 4/10/2012, p. 5*).
- America's 400 richest families have seen their effective federal income tax rate drop by 60 percent over the last 50 years, plummeting from 42 percent to 18 percent. (*David Cay Johnston, Tax Notes, Is Our Tax System Helping Us Create Wealth?, 12/21/2009, Comparing Income Growth and Income Tax Burdens in 1961 and 2006, p. 1376*).

**Opposing efforts to slash Medicaid funding or otherwise undermine the program's ability to serve millions of vulnerable children.**

- Medicaid provides essential health care for children, the poor, disabled, and elderly.
- Of the 68 million people covered by Medicaid, half are children under the age of 19, whose families depend on Medicaid for health care coverage. **One third of our nation's children rely on Medicaid for their health care.**

## **Voter Suppression**

### **Support legislation to protect the right to vote and block voter suppression efforts.**

- Approximately 10% of Americans of voting age do not have a state issued photo ID, and requiring them to purchase one in order to vote is equivalent to a poll tax. No eligible citizen should have to pay to vote.
- Hispanics, Native Americans and African Americans are less likely to have photo identification. Such groups have been the historic targets of voter discrimination in this country. Strict voter identification laws unfairly target their participation in elections.
- Veterans, the elderly, and persons with disabilities will be prohibited from voting. Many older people no longer drive or maintain up-to-date driver's licenses. If and when such laws pass, many veterans serving our country overseas may not be eligible to vote.
- Voters in rural areas would be particularly affected. Not all cities have Motor Vehicle Division (MVD) offices and getting to a place to obtain an ID could present an undue burden on voters living in rural areas.

## **Education Votes Action Center**

### **NEA has unveiled an "Education Votes Action Center" to allow members to get more active in the presidential campaign.**

[Click Here for Education Votes](#) Education Votes Action Center is a fun way to try to spur your friends, neighbors, and family to vote and to win prizes. From the main website, click the link titled "Action Center" in the upper right hand corner of the page. From there you will be taken to a login page where you can either create your own unique login or use your existing Facebook account to start campaigning. Using advanced computer tracking, the website takes you through different levels. You start by entering the names and emails of friends that you think may want to vote for President Barack Obama. Next, the system generates a list of people for you to call and gives you a script to read. As an NEA member, you only call other NEA members. Since Nebraska isn't a swing state in the election, you will be asked to call members in another state. Finally, as you accumulate points and move up levels, you can host a house party or participate in other events that help promote NEA's endorsed presidential candidate. It's fun, it's easy, and it's REAL organizing.

