

To: GEA Members

From: Scott Minnick

Topic: Summary of this year's NEA RA in Washington DC

This summer, I attended the NEA Representative Assembly (RA).

I would like to share my delegate experience with you. We can all get insulated in our little communities and forget there is a big world outside of Glastonbury, CT. At the RA you get a sense of it all from the highest levels of government (Hillary Clinton, Senator Lamar Alexander and Senator Patty Murray addressed the delegates) to the international community (teachers from all over the world addressed the RA) to every type of issue across the U.S.

One thing I can tell you for sure, the leaders of the NEA are incredibly impressive individuals and I'm not easily impressed. Lily Eskelsen Garcia (president), Becky Pringle (VP), Princess Moss (treasurer), John Stocks (executive director) and Mary Kusler (Director of Government Relations) all either gave inspiring speeches and/or demonstrated great vision, sensitivity, patience and expertise. I can't imagine the NEA being led by a more capable team of individuals! I can also tell you that this year's National Teacher of the Year, JahanaHayes, from Waterbury, CT is an incredibly insightful and dedicated teacher. Below is the introduction. You can see her full speech if you go to the [NEA web site](#) which will make you feel great about being a teacher.

Jahana began by asking a few questions: "What comes out of a school district that is identified as underperforming, where 100% of the students are on free or reduced lunch. What comes out of a destructive neighborhood where multiple generations of the same family live in poverty, succumb to addiction and are surrounded by persistent violence? What comes out of a household where there is no discussion of college or higher education? And finally, what comes out of the cycle of teenage pregnancy where mother, grandmother and daughter are all parents before the age of 18? (The Answer) A National Teacher of The Year"...

I learned that the National Education Association Representative Assembly (RA) is the largest democratic gathering of people in the U.S. and maybe the world. Ten Thousand teachers convene each year to decide the direction of the organization and every delegate to the assembly is as important as the next and has an equal voice in steering the ship. What follows is a summary of what went on at the RA:

At the RA several types of issues are voted on. Surprisingly not all of these issues are strictly educational in nature but deal with broader social/societal problems.

The Constitution, By-laws and Standing rules form the backbone of how the NEA does business. These items cover everything from term limits of the officers to how dues get set to how and when a delegate can speak on an issue at the RA.

Resolutions are the values and beliefs of the NEA. During this RA there

were 4 extremely hot topics that were heavily supported and garnered a lot of discussion.

1. During the prior RA, the NEA embarked on a full blown initiative to combat institutional racism. That initiative was reinforced at this year's RA. Needless to say, the deaths of two young black men at the hands of law enforcement in Minnesota and Louisiana were not lost on the delegates. I think it is fair to say that teachers across the country feel for the dangers their students of color face in their daily lives.

2. Related to the above was a strong stance that the delegates took in support of gun regulation. The victims of Orlando, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Columbine and San Bernardino loomed heavy over the convention and there were several observances in honor of the victims.

3. Universally the delegates came down hard on the negative impact of charter schools in the U.S. and the need for teachers to aggressively support free public education in our country. Even public charter schools came under a lot of criticism. In some parts of the country, the implementation of charter schools has severely impacted the resources available to public schools. There have even been instances where the existence of charter schools have led to the closing of public schools and then when the charter schools turned out not to be profitable, they closed leaving the communities with no way to educate their children.

4. There was overwhelming concern for members in the LGBTQ community and many resolutions calling for the NEA to take steps in helping members of this community to obtain rights and acceptance in society.

A third type of issue that delegates vote on is the legislative priorities of the NEA. Here the key issues were:

1. Re-authorization of the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act)
2. Many initiatives in support of safe schools for students and teachers
3. Eliminating standardized tests for measuring student achievement or teacher effectiveness
4. Ensuring a high quality public education for all

While not specifically stipulated, one thread that I thought was woven through many of the resolutions and legislative priorities that were being discussed was the need for schools to do more to support the mental health needs of our students. It seemed to me there was an overwhelming consensus that mental health issues are educational issues and schools need to be aggressive in training parents, teachers, administrators, etc. in

identifying students that need help and getting them to the right services.

A fourth type of voting item was "Policy Statements". The big issue here related to the school to prison pipeline. The ACLU and the NEA believe that children should be educated and not incarcerated. The NEA will be adopting several initiatives to get policies and practices within public school systems and the juvenile justice system that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline changed.

Most of the other policy initiatives had to do with reigning back charter schools and eliminating standardized testing from teacher evaluation programs.

The last and most time consuming part of the RA are the New Business Items (125 in all during this RA). Any delegate can recommend that the NEA spend a portion of their annual contingency budget on a new business activity of their choosing and if enough delegates agree, the NEA pursues the initiative. These items range anywhere from having Lily Eskelsen Garcia write a letter to the Mexican president protesting Mexican Educational Reforms (\$1500 cost) to having the NEA implement an action plan to prevent acts of violence targeted at people who are perceived or identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) at a cost of \$135,000. The requested new business items were as varied as they could possibly be, but there were many that tracked the main themes contained in the resolutions, legislative and policy initiatives. A listing of all New Business Items that were adopted are listed on the [NEA website](#).

Outside of the voting items, the clear message of the RA was that the association needs to return to its ORGANIZING roots and get as many members involved in union activities as possible (especially newer teachers). Even though the Friedrich's case has been temporarily ruled on in the NEA's favor, the case is scheduled to come back on the docket in 2018 when there will be 9 justices in place. By that time the NEA and its state and local affiliates have got to make the case to their members that the NEA is relevant and needs to be supported. As part of the FEA strategic plan, we have our own organizing initiative in the works and you will all be hearing about that at the beginning of next year.