



Great Public Schools for Every Student

STATEMENT OF

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Chairman Miller and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about ensuring effective teachers for all children. I commend the committee for convening a hearing on this very important issue.

The vision of the National Education Association (NEA) is “a great public school for every student.” Unfortunately, despite the intense commitment of NEA members, too many students in high poverty communities do not enjoy the benefits of a great public school because their schools are often chronically under-funded, under-staffed, and unsupported. This is simply unacceptable.

Each day, countless dedicated, talented teachers and support professionals report to work in these challenging and low-resourced schools, knowing they will face students with a sobering array of social and economic disadvantages, working conditions that impede the highest possible levels of teaching and learning, and a revolving door of administrators and teachers. These heroes and heroines perform amazing tasks, often with the least amount of support and resources.

Nevertheless, we cannot cover up the fact that too often schools with the greatest needs are filled with the most inexperienced and least skilled teachers. As a result, talented teachers in high-needs schools work alongside colleagues who lack training, are unprepared for the challenges they encounter, and who, due to revolving-door staffing patterns, are banished to high-needs schools without any support.

NEA is here today to say “No more.” We will not participate in or turn away from this shame. We will be active partners with this Administration and this Congress to assure every student in America does indeed attend a great public school.

Everyone is talking about supporting students in their “race to the top.” The key to turning out great students is great teachers. Great teachers, with the right policy supports, are the ideal agents of meaningful and sustainable change in our most challenged schools. NEA believes that solutions are at hand if policymakers, parents, and teachers themselves promote thoughtful and comprehensive strategies to address working conditions, school leadership, and teacher quality.

This month, NEA and the Center for Teaching Quality released *Children of Poverty Deserve Great Teachers*, a groundbreaking report presenting solid, proven strategies and policy recommendations that can make a difference. It also offers solutions to recruiting, preparing, supporting, and compensating teachers for high-needs schools and highlights NEA’s commitments to ensure great teachers are in every classroom.

I would like to take you through some of the highlights of this report as well as the actions NEA and our state affiliates are taking to implement the report recommendations.

The Reality in High-Poverty Schools

From the White House to local communities, our nation is recognizing teacher quality as a key factor for strengthening U.S. public schools for all children. Many influences, including home and community life, play a role in student achievement, but no school-based issue may be as

critical and within our power to fix as the inequitable distribution of qualified and effective teachers.

Many highly skilled and dedicated teachers struggle daily to keep the ship of learning afloat in our most challenging schools. Nonetheless, children of poverty and those of color are far less likely to be taught by qualified, effective teachers than are students from more affluent families. This daunting reality hovers like an albatross over those who work daily, against the odds, to improve student achievement in our low-income communities.

The research is sobering:

- High-poverty schools are much more likely to have special education and math teaching vacancies and are forced to staff classrooms with out-of-field and inexperienced teachers, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.
- In New York City’s high-poverty schools, 20 percent of teachers have less than three years of experience, compared to only 11 percent in more affluent schools, according to a recent study. Furthermore, qualified teachers in high-poverty schools (credentialed, experienced teachers who are teaching in their field and who score well on tests of academic and teaching ability) are more likely to leave teaching than their less qualified peers in those schools.
- Study after study has shown that teachers associated with high “value-added” student achievement gains and teachers who are National Board Certified are relatively unlikely to be teaching economically disadvantaged and minority students.
- Asking high-needs schools to rely on relatively inexperienced, poorly prepared teachers — or better qualified teachers who quickly exit their classrooms — creates a chronic condition that undermines long-term, school-based strategies to improve teaching and learning.

What do Teachers Need to Be Effective?

Teachers cannot do it alone. Every member of the community has a role and is responsible for the conditions of our schools and for providing a safe and secure learning environment for our children. Teachers want to be successful, and we should do what we can so that they are not set up to fail.

It’s not about the money. Nobody enters teaching for financial security. They enter the profession because they care passionately about educating children and preparing them to succeed.

NEA has worked with more than 2,000 of the nation’s best teachers who told us what will attract and keep our most effective teachers in our most challenging schools:

- Good principals who both know how to lead and support teacher leadership;
- A commitment to creative teaching and inquiry-based learning, not scripted instruction;
- The opportunity to team with a critical mass of highly-skilled teachers who share responsibility for every student’s success;
- Improved working conditions; and
- Additional pay to recognize the difficult work in turning around a struggling school.

Working conditions are of paramount concern when it comes to decisions about working in high-needs schools. Teachers, like surgeons, require a well equipped environment in which to do their best work. We cannot expect them to be successful if we do not provide the tools and resources needed to do the job. The data are clear: a child’s learning environment is a critical factor in his or her long-term success. We cannot hold teachers accountable for substandard conditions beyond their control and must acknowledge that conditions of teaching and learning are essential to achieving high levels of student learning.

We need to support teachers in their early years and throughout their careers. It is important that we not only recruit new teachers to work in high-needs schools, but that we foster an environment that encourages professional development and continual learning opportunities for teachers within our schools and districts to help meet the needs of students. We also must “grow our own” accomplished teachers and not rely solely on new recruits for our staffing needs.

Too often, school district recruitment and hiring practices rest on outdated mid-20th century organizational assumptions about teaching, learning, gender roles, and the career mobility patterns of young adults. Few systems are developing new teachers from within their own high-needs communities. Additionally, few are partnering with universities and nonprofits to make strategic investments in new teacher residency programs that can both drive improved working conditions and assure a steady supply of well-prepared, “culturally competent” teachers for high-needs schools.

NEA’s Strategies and Commitments

NEA’s *Children in Poverty* report describes four strategies that will move us past the usual “either/or” thinking about the future of teaching toward research-driven policies that can transform every high-poverty school in America into a high-performing school, fully staffed by effective teachers.

- **Recruit *and* prepare teachers for work in high-needs schools.**
- **Take a comprehensive approach to teacher incentives.** Lessons from the private sector and voices of teachers indicate that performance pay makes the most difference when it focuses on “building a collaborative workplace culture” to improve practices and outcomes.
- **Identify working conditions that serve students.** We need to fully identify the school conditions most likely to serve students by attracting, developing, retaining, and inspiring effective and accomplished teachers.
- **Define teacher effectiveness broadly, in terms of student learning.** We need new evaluation tools and processes to measure how teachers think about their practice, as well as help students learn. For example, in the Performance Assessment for California Teaching (PACT), new teachers are expected to demonstrate their knowledge of content and how to teach it in real life circumstances and context. PACT is now spreading to other states. Seen as a valid measure of individual teacher competence, it is useful for teacher licensure and as a powerful tool for teacher learning and program improvement. Such performance

assessments have the potential of focusing teacher evaluation on student learning without the distortions caused by the singular use of standardized test scores.

NEA, as part of an initiative it will launch called *The Priority Schools Campaign*, has committed significant resources to ensuring a great public school for every student. Those commitments include investing \$1 million per year over six years to pursue comprehensive strategies and policies that will increase teacher effectiveness in high-needs schools. NEA takes its union leadership role seriously and is committed to raising the bar and requiring our members to meet a standard of excellence that will help us achieve great public schools for every student by 2020.

Through *The Priority Schools Campaign*, NEA commits to:

- **Address barriers in collective bargaining agreements** by requesting that every local NEA affiliate enter into a compact or memorandum of understanding (MOU) with its local school district to waive any contract language that prohibits staffing high-needs schools with great teachers. These compacts should also add commitments that would enhance this goal. Similarly, NEA would promote compacts or MOUs for its non-collective bargaining local affiliates that have high-needs schools in their districts.

Several NEA affiliates have addressed, in collaboration with school districts, collective bargaining barriers to addressing staffing needs in high-needs schools. The MOUs that have resulted from these collaborations are producing positive results.

- **Launch a major member outreach effort** using its union advocacy and leadership position to encourage the most accomplished teacher-members to start their teaching careers in high-needs schools, remain teaching there, or transfer to high-needs schools.
- **Support the establishment of locally based recruitment and support programs** that encourage teachers to devote at least five years of service to strengthening teaching in high-needs schools.
- **Establish a national recognition program** to support and publicize the efforts of teachers, schools, and districts to strengthen quality teaching in high-needs schools.
- **Work with the philanthropic community** and with local, state, and national policymakers to expand the depth and breadth of NEA's initial investments.
- **Support mentoring programs for new teachers in high-needs schools** that offer a wide array of support and resources needed to teach effectively in high-needs schools.
- **Work in partnership with local and state affiliates to implement programs in high-needs schools to grow teacher quality and effectiveness** through National Board Certification.

NEA also continues to support and promote incentives for National Board Certification as an essential tool for improving teacher quality and for staffing high-needs schools.

Where and when possible, NEA will support local and state association development of appropriate incentives through collective bargaining and other state/local policy avenues. We will also support our state and local affiliates who partner in pursuit of innovative incentive and compensation programs (through funding streams such as the TIF grant program).

And NEA will develop resources and strategies to help its affiliates expand the scope of collective bargaining to pursue collaboratively at the bargaining table multiple measures of student learning and teacher quality.

Conclusion

History has shown that a one-size-fits-all regulatory regime for teacher recruitment and preparation is unreasonable. As Stanford University Professor Linda Darling-Hammond has noted, staffing and supporting high-needs schools with truly highly qualified and effective teachers will require the equivalent of a Marshall Plan for teaching. It is time to listen to our teacher leaders, learn from them, and go beyond current “either/or” policy thinking in favor of multiple approaches to teaching quality.

Our nation has the capacity to make sure every child in every high-needs school has great teachers. President Obama has called for the nation to “treat teachers like the professionals they are while also holding them more accountable.” Doing so means not only looking carefully at the research evidence, but also listening to our most accomplished teachers and acting on their advice. As the President has suggested, they are ready to “lift up their schools.” They are ready to maintain the promise of great public schools for our nation. It is time to hear their voices and embrace their ideas for recruiting, preparing, rewarding, and supporting great teachers — the teachers that all students deserve.

I have included with this testimony a complete copy of our *Children of Poverty* report. Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion.