

Address to the 2009 NEA-NH Delegate Assembly
Michelle Walter, Chair, Membership Development Committee
March 27, 2009

Albert Hirshman, an economist and social philosopher, in his classic text *"Exit, Voice and Loyalty,"* argues that whenever faced with difficult or undesirable conditions, people have a choice between leaving for another, hopefully better situation, called the "exit" option, or staying and working to change those conditions, the "voice" option. The voice is a political response, rooted in democratic principals and the notion of participation. It is the civic principle that one has the right and the OBLIGATION to join with others of a similar interest and mind and make changes for the betterment of those conditions. The voice option is the CORE of our union and why we are here.

One set of means to exercise that democratic voice is collective bargaining. While often seen as being solely about salary and benefits, our bargaining is more encompassing. Addressing violence in schools is an example. A safe and orderly school is paramount to education. Through collective bargaining, schools have developed safety committees, developed safety plans, developed procedure for dealing with unruly students. NEA-NH has programs like "Bullyproof" and classroom management workshops for new teachers.

Think about the additional elements that have improved education, which come from collective bargaining. Mentoring of new teachers, for example. Does that benefit the association and the individual teacher? Of course, but it also benefits the students who have a better prepared instructor. It is the same for mandatory orientation and training for paraprofessionals and new employees.

While collective bargaining is about efforts to win a decent and fair standard of living, economic security, basic rights and due process in the workplace, we have extended it beyond ourselves to address the quality of school and education. Your local and NEA-NH aren't self-absorbed entities who only care about themselves. Look at what we've done.

It is a trying time economically. It is the constant focus of the media. Bailouts and bonuses and general nervousness about the economic future. If we consider Hirshman's theory, we have two choices.

I suppose we could take the "exit" option and leave or give up membership because, well, that money coming from our paychecks could be used to help pay some bills, or squirrel away for a rainy day. (I am a single mother of three; I understand this) But we have chosen to participate. We have chosen to be part of the voice which advocates for education. We have risen to our obligation as educational employees to speak on behalf of ourselves and the children with whom we work. There is a cost. It is financial, our time, our energy. Sometimes, all three.

We are often asked or expected to sacrifice ourselves for the good of the students, and many of us do. We work late, come in early. We buy treats and supplies with our own money. We volunteer for committee work, or to chaperone. We take time to watch athletic competitions at school; we attend our student's recital and events. We go above and beyond what is expected of us, and yet we are often asked to do more.

Imagine what your day would be like without the CBA. Most of you wouldn't be here today, you'd be working, you'd have no guaranteed time off. (Thank you to those who took day off without pay.)

We need a strong association now more than ever. When communities look for places to save money, the school budget seems like a good place to start. And how many communities have done just that? How many of your contracts were defeated this year?

Now more than ever, we need to stand together and remind our communities of the essential work we do. We believe in a quality education for all students, we believe in fairness and justice. Never doubt that we fight for it every day. (State testing, updated materials, music and art, foreign language, PE, nurses, guidance, paraprofessionals, special education services, warm and clean, and safe schools).

What is your vision of the future of education? I know I want the best for my children. I want them to be exposed to the greatest thinker of all time, to explore the world, to choose their paths. I want them to be safe, and I want to know that they are surrounded by people who have a true love of learning. I want to know that they are getting a great education, along with all the other children in the state, and in the country.

And it won't be easy. There is no Staples Easy Button. I wish there were. And so I am here. I have CHOSEN to be here.

Thank you for your commitment to education and for not exiting when we need each other the most.