

Address to the 2009 NEA-NH Delegate Assembly
President Rhonda Wesolowski
March 27, 2009

Thank you, Sam. Thank you everyone for being here, and thank you for re-electing me as president of NEA-NH. I am certainly grateful for the opportunity to advocate for public education and to lead our great organization in these challenging but exciting times. I want to talk to you today about some of our challenges and some of our opportunities.

Sam, I'm not sure this is where I want to be on the agenda after that informative presentation. As a matter of fact, timing is not my strong suit. After raising my two children as a single parent I finally found myself financially able to have a few dollars to invest in the stock market. Folks, this was in 1999. So if you put \$10,000 in stocks on Jan 1, 1999 and matched the return on December 31, 2008 you ended up with a little over 8,700 dollars. Even after counting reinvested stocks. That's the equivalent of an average compounded loss of 1.4 percent a year — the worst 10 year-stretch ever for stocks. But we can't always choose our timing. The important thing is to set the right course even when the timing seems to work against us. The important thing is to make up our minds, in the words of President Barack Obama, "Yes we can!"

I have been thinking about Charles Dickens, the great English author, who wrote in 1859, in his novel *The Tale of Two Cities*, these famous lines:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us . . .

Over the last few months we all have probably experienced lightness and darkness, hope and despair. When you first elected me as your president in 2007, the economic outlook was rosy as the stock market continued to climb month after month. But there were troubling signs nonetheless. We watched the middle class shrink while the rich grew super-rich, and we were troubled by increasing homelessness, which included some of our students. Those of us who thought the Bush economy was too good to be true turned out, sadly, to be right. We experienced the worst of times as the stock market lost half its value and an economic collapse rippled around the world.

Yes, times are tough, and many of us have first-hand experience with the economic loss. We worry about our jobs, our family members' jobs and our students and their families.

With every crisis comes opportunity, and what I really want to talk about today are the opportunities that NEA-New Hampshire has to help turn the current challenges into accomplishments.

Our president is facing the most serious economic challenges in half a century; his steady hand and measured approach already seems to be putting our country on the right track. Just this week we had reports of better than expected home sales in New Hampshire, and the stock market gained almost 500 points on Monday. We can expect ups and downs, but

our new leadership in Washington, President Obama, Senator Shaheen, and Representatives Shea-Porter and Hodes are committed to putting our country on the road to recovery.

With their help, we now have the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the ARRA), also known as the stimulus bill. This legislation provides new federal funds for education in New Hampshire. A hundred and forty-two million dollars will flow into our schools through existing programs like the IDEA grants and Title I. In addition, there is a state fiscal stabilization fund of two hundred million dollars. This can be spent at the governor's discretion, within federal guidelines. The further good news is that a hundred and sixty-four million dollars of this fund must also be spent on education, and the remaining thirty-six million can be spent on education but may also be spent on government services. Folks, this is real money. And the purpose of these funds is to save jobs.

This did not come about only because we elected new leaders. Your union, at the national level, advocated in the strongest terms for funds to support education. As the ARRA made its way through Congress, the education funds were at risk, but we succeeded — and some of you helped by making calls to our Congressional delegation — in persuading Congress to include them. If you hear any member say, "You can't beat City Hall" or "I don't do politics," set them straight. Don't nod your head and walk away. Tell them what we have done together. Tell them what we have done for them. Tell them what we have done for our students. In a world where politics matter and campaign contributions have far too much influence, we cannot leave one member behind. Electing candidates who support our agenda is a must. It is a job for all of us.

Speaking of politics, I'd like to add this. No political party should take our support for granted. And no political party should write us off. We support candidates based on their support for public education and educators, not on party affiliation. It is a fact of life that we agree more with one party than the other. That does not mean that we write off New Hampshire voters and a significant number of our members. We need our Republican members to step forward and speak to their leaders about the need to support our issues.

We are indeed fortunate to have a union during these times. Unions were not organized because everything was going well. Unions are a product of tough times. When the Knights of Labor organized in the 1860s the issues were ending child labor and attaining equal pay for women. During the Great Depression, unemployment was high. Many employers tried to get as much work as possible from their employees for the lowest possible wages. Workers were upset with the speed-up of assembly lines, working conditions and the lack of job security. Seeking strength in unity, they formed unions. Unions representing educators are a more recent phenomenon. Our history is the growth of a professional organization transforming itself into a union in response to the poor pay and disrespect our employers often gave us. The public employee collective bargaining law in New Hampshire, passed in 1976, was the result of a strike in the Timberlane Regional School District two years earlier.

Despite these economic times, through union membership we can still bring improvements to wages, benefits and working conditions. Membership also brings a measure of job security to employees in the field of education. Remember the old adage, "United we bargain divided we beg"? Together we are much stronger than we are as individuals when we advocate for children, our members and public education.

So we have this marvelous, rich history of fighting for our members and their rights. What does this have to say about the tough times we are in today? Change is not always easy. It

requires flexibility. It demands that we make do with what we have and figure out new ways to use it. As educators, we do these things because the children we educate need the skills and tools we give them in order to succeed. Think about this fact: every business, every building constructed, every book ever written and on and on, was done because the person who did these things had an educator touch his or her life. Because of what we do, things change.

In thinking and speaking about change, do you know when I was young:

- Spam was something mothers fried with eggs;
- A cell phone was something only James Bond used;
- Coke was just a soda and crack was something if you stepped on would break your mother's back.
- A virus was something people caught, not machines;
- You couldn't see Russia from Alaska.
- Why, I have been around so long I remember when banks lent money to people and not the other way around.

Seriously, when I began teaching, our special needs children were warehoused in state institutions. Now we improve their lives by teaching them in our classrooms. Years ago, In order to hear someone speak with an accent you had to go to the west side of Manchester. Now our colleagues who work in the Manchester School system hear over 90 different languages and dialects spoken in their buildings, and even though New Hampshire now has more forest land than it did at the time of the signing of our United States Constitution, the problems of urban schools exist even in the smallest of our school districts.

Too often we regard membership in NEA-New Hampshire from the perspective of "What have you done for me lately?" We act as if the services our union provides to us are its only reason for being. One thing we can learn from our history is that belonging to a union is about a cause. So we need to ask ourselves in these times, what is our cause? What are we about? How can we articulate our cause and our mission to our members and the public? As union members we share a heritage forged in the 1800's when Italians, Poles, French, Jews, Irish and immigrants from every other nation stood together, some sacrificing their own lives for the common good. The people, living in a new land, not even being able to communicate with each other in their native tongues, said enough was enough. Respect, equality and justice were their causes. During the height of the Depression in the 1930's, factory workers stood with farmers and skilled craftsmen with line workers, to demand respect, equality, and justice.

As these were their causes, they are now ours. Our entire membership, counselors, teachers, nurses and our ESPs, are entitled to compensation that reflects the jobs we do. And when we retire, we deserve the pensions promised when we began our careers.

As we strive to do a better job, your Executive Board, the staff of NEA-New Hampshire and I invite you to enter into a dialog with us. Take advantage of the technology we have and contact us with your thoughts and ideas

I have already mentioned our success in electing a president and members of Congress who are committed to an economic recovery. We also had success at the state level in maintaining pro-education majorities in the State House. Our Government Relations Committee and Executive Board are to be congratulated for basing their candidate recommendations on issues, not political parties. I am pleased to announce that we now have three Republicans on our GR Committee. There is one thing that must be absolutely clear to every member of NEA-NH: Laws don't change themselves.

During the past two years we have had outstanding legislative successes. We defeated constitutional amendments on school funding with such huge majorities that legislative leaders no longer have the stomach for seriously considering them.

We restored the rights of teachers to negotiate arbitration in nonrenewal cases. This right, which all other public employees had, was taken away from our members, but we got it back.

One of the toughest challenges was Evergreen legislation. We won that one; too, making sure that you can get your step raises under an expired contract while you negotiate a new one. This is another law that applies to our education support professionals, as well as teachers.

We supported legislation to increase the drop-out age to 18. This law goes into effect in July of this year. Already, New Hampshire, with the awareness and work surrounding the drop-out issue, has reduced the dropout rate from 15.1 percent to a cumulative rate of 9.7 percent. Research shows that preventing one student from dropping out of school will save taxpayers more than \$209,000 over that person's lifetime.

When an organization called the New Hampshire Advantage Coalition brought tens of thousands of dollars of out-of-state money into New Hampshire to put tax caps on the ballot in cities and towns, we organized to stop them. We were successful in nine of ten towns where this was an issue last year.

Not all our successes were driven by national or state initiatives. The real successes are what you do. I want to recognize some locals and individual members and staff whose achievements are impressive.

- The Somersworth Association of Educators, led by President Paula Turgeon and UniServ director Peter Miller, against all odds, kept the tax cap proposal off their ballot.
- The Manchester Education Association, with the leadership of Scott MacGilvray and Ben Dick, defeated an attempt by the city to take over the school district and replace an elected school board with who knows what.

- The members of the Hampstead Education Association and the Hampstead Association of School Staff worked with Katie Wolff to take 31 middle school students to the presidential inauguration. Every one of the staff who worked on this project is a member of NEA-New Hampshire.
- The members of the Haverhill Cooperative Education Association fought for and succeeded in winning a bond vote to replace the roof of their school that was on the verge of collapsing.
- Teacher of the Year Deborah Fogg began her career as a para-educator then went on to earn her degree. Deb is a member of NEA-New Hampshire and the White Mountain Regional Education Association.
- Natalie Shaw was a member of the Manchester Education Association when she set her goal to become Miss New Hampshire. Guess what — she did!
- NEA-NH Coordinator of Public Education and School Support Irv Richardson will earn his doctorate in teacher education and school improvement from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst later this year.
- AnnMarie Morse, president of the Pembroke Association of Educators, succeeded in lobbying for legislation to prevent college students with serious illnesses from falling through a crack in our health insurance system. Michelle's law was named for her daughter, a student teacher who did not survive cancer. AnnMarie went on to secure passage of national legislation and continues to work on health care reform.
- Dianne Dunfey of the Seabrook Education Association stood up for her constitutional right of free speech, and suffered countless acts of harassment by her principal as a result. Due to Dianne's courage and willingness to stand up for what is right, she outlasted the principal and was able, with the assistance of NEA-NH staff attorney Steve Sacks, to settle her lawsuit against the school district on favorable terms.
- Upper Valley UniServ Director Brian Sullivan completed two half-marathons and is training for his first full marathon this spring. Lakes Uniserv Director Jan Paddleford completed a 60-mile walk around Lake Winnepesaukee. Both Brian and Jan undertook these feats to support sisters who are afflicted with breast cancer.
- The Winnacunnet Warriors girls' basketball team has won the Class L championship three years in a row under Coach Ed Beattie, who has been a member for many years.
- Muriel Hall, former president of the Bow Education Association, currently awaits the decision on whether she will be awarded an Albert Einstein Fellowship to work on Capitol Hill with the Department of Energy or the Office of Cyberinfrastructure.

I want to recognize our members who are not at this assembly, and in fact are not in our classrooms because they are serving in the military in Iraq or Afghanistan.

- William Parkman of the Monadnock Regional Teacher's Association, a teacher at Troy Elementary School, is serving in the Navy in Afghanistan.

I sent a request to local presidents. Did we miss any members currently serving in Iraq or Afghanistan? If so, please stand and tell us who they are.

This is just a very small sampling of stories about our members and staff whose accomplishments are remarkable.

Here are some of my ideas as to how we can meet the challenges we face in the next three years:

I believe membership development must be our number one priority. We need to capture the nonmembers in existing locals. If the reason our colleagues are not joining is because they feel they get the benefits without paying for them, we should look to negotiating a fair share fee.

We need to continue to form partnerships with our allies in education and in labor groups to achieve our goals. We currently have very successful partnerships with the Retirement Security Coalition, the New Hampshire Retired Educators Association, the Department of Education, Granite State Progress and America Votes. We need to explore partnerships with other groups to continue to engage the public in support of education. We have the ability to build successful relationships, even with people who hold different perspectives.

We need to continue our outreach to our Republican members. Seriously, folks, we are a non-partisan group, but so often we are thought of as an arm of the Democratic Party. To some extent this is because we recommend candidates based on their views on education and more often than not, whether you agree or not, these pro-education views have been endorsed by democrats.

We need to be proactive in recommending fair tax structures: economic development policies that level the playing field for businesses and guarantee adequate and equitable education funding.

Investing in public education is an incredible economic stimulus. The best investment we can make in America's long term economic growth is education. Over a 50 year period, common stocks returned an average of 6.3 percent a year. A World Bank study found a dollar invested in education returns 14.3 percent annually in tax revenue and reduced government spending on social services.

We, members of NEA-NH, need to be poised for the greatest economic and social reform in the lifetime of many of our members. We can inspire each other to embrace positive change. We will step beyond what was, and fashion what will be. We will work to affect the best of times for our students, our members and public education. If we let each other down, we fail. The challenges are many, but individually and collectively — as an organization 16,000 members strong — we will dig deeply into all of our resources: intellectual, financial and physical. We will tap into that indomitable spirit of all Americans who step up and say we can do it or in the spirit of the Obama campaign that swept the nation YES WE CAN!

I have given you some idea of where I think we need to go. Now I want to ask if you are willing to take this journey with me. If you are willing say, "Yes we can."

Together can we embrace positive change? "Yes we can."

Can we continue to reduce the dropout rate? "Yes we can."

Can we involve more members in political action? "Yes we can."

Can we bring improvement to wages, benefits, and working conditions? "Yes we can."

Can we improve our outreach to the public? "Yes we can."

Can we work harder to recruit non-members? "Yes we can."

Even though times are tough can we support and inspire each other to build an even stronger NEA-NH? "Yes we can."

Thank you very much — go get 'em.