

2008 National Education Association
Representative Assembly
Delegate Report

The NEA annual Representative Assembly (RA) was held from July 2 through July 7 in our nations Capital, Washington DC. The California Delegation of about 1,100 elected representatives began arriving June 27. All delegates were expected to be present and registered on Monday, June 30, to be ready for the very busy and demanding schedule that awaited us.

It was my honor to represent the Antelope Valley Teacher's Association as the locally elected NEA Delegate and be part of the largest state delegation, the CTA. It was a unique opportunity and an extremely empowering experience to be among 10,000 educators, and 8,000 staff and support personal, coming together from all 50 States, for the purpose of improving our profession and dedicated to the notion that all students deserve a great public school education.

A typical day in the life of an NEA Delegate begins at 7:00 sharp. The individual State Caucus Meetings begin at that time. The CTA Caucus meetings are open only to delegates from California. These meetings are run by David Sanchez, CTA President, and a highly qualified cast of officials and staff. The goals being to review the agenda items coming before the NEA later that same morning and decide, as a group, which items we would support and those that we would not. There were also reports, presentations, introductions, elections, voting, and more voting. The primary goal was to develop strategies that promoted positive objectives for California and the nation. Following NEA bylaws, state delegations have a limit of 2 hours to conduct all caucus activities. Two hours never seemed so short!

Delegates would depart from their various state caucus meeting locations and converge at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center for the National Representative Assembly. Nobody was allowed into the assembly arena without official delegate credentials. Security is always a priority at the RA. Once inside, seating was arranged by state, region within the state, and individual delegate's assigned seat. In my case, I sat with the group of 20 from High Desert Service Center Council region. They were a wonderful bunch and I have had the pleasure of working with many of them before. The NEA-RA meetings continue for the rest of the day and often into the evening. There are resolutions, bylaws, bylaw amendments, legislative amendments, standing rules and new business items. Reports are made, dignitaries are introduced, tributes are given, dozens of agenda items are voted, candidates are elected to fill NEA leadership and directors positions. All the while, the unstoppable Reg Weaver conducts business as if a maestro conducting 10,000 piece Orchestra.

The meetings were run with amazing efficient and a model of organizational skill, as was expected.

During the week that the NEA-RA was in session, we accomplished a staggering amount work. If anyone needs a first hand lesson in democracy in action, parliamentary protocol, and Roberts Rules of Order, NEA knows the way. Running a meeting of 10,000 teachers, and other educational professionals, requires discipline and professionalism.

NEA President, Reg Weaver, can run a meeting, the unprepared and uninformed are swiftly, but respectfully corrected or ruled out of order. This experience was not for

the easily intimidated as 10,000 of your newest and closest friends were watching! All delegates had the right to address the assembly, on any agenda item, at any time, and know that their views would be heard. A Delegate would have 3 minutes to speak to an item, one speaker at a time, often with lines of individuals waiting their turn at each of the 40 or so microphones. Each speaker appears on multiple jumbo screens located to the rear of the stage and facing the audience. I witnessed a few delegates momentarily paralyzed by the sight of their huge faces projected close-up, as if watching themselves in a movie, except this was in real time. Anyway - motions are made and seconded, debated for and against, people vote and move on...

It is interesting to note that many of other states seemed to have a love / hate relationship with CTA. On the one hand, California is so big that any small state wanting their business item to have the best chance of being adopted, at the RA level, needed to come courting for CTA support. When we agreed to support their business item or candidate, it's "California, here we come." When they didn't get the support they sought, it's shake, rattle, grumble and groan, lamenting the fact that California has the most teachers, largest number of delegates and greatest amount of leverage at the NEA. Many other state delegations respect us and a few resent us because of this.

In addition to the business at hand, several fundraisers took place. One of the most significant was the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education. The California Delegation made the largest contribution of \$534,010.00 toward the \$1,848,691.00 grand total raised. There were also exceptional and inspirational speeches that were given by the NEA Teacher and Educational Support Professional (ESP) of the year as well as the key-note speaker, President Weaver and others.

In his address to the delegation, President Weaver laid out a vision of hope for the future of public education and for positive change in our Nation. His tone was, at times, reflective on the accomplishments that Team NEA has made during his distinguished tenure as leader of the largest labor organization in the world. Weaver spoke passionately about the NEA goal of "Great public schools for every child." Weaver's message inspired the crowd, but, there were also mixed emotions as well, most of the delegates were aware that this Representative Assembly would be his final. NEA President, Reg Weaver would retire at the conclusion of this RA and passing the torch to a new NEA president would be one of our final orders of business. Mr. Weaver provided 6 years of tireless dedication and commitment to students, and public education. He was the voice of the NEA and champion for public school children everywhere.

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote of Weaver: "It is my privilege to congratulate Reg Weaver on two successful terms as President of the NEA. His devotion to our nation's children, and to giving each and every child a world-class education, was plain to see in his hard work as president. We share a fundamental belief that all of our children to reach their God-given potential, and Reg has spent his career – from the classroom to the national stage – working to fulfill that promise. Thank you, Reg, and God bless."

Reg is famous for his inspirational speaking ability, his story telling, and his unique laugh, "Hey-Hey-Hey-Hey-Hey." (much like Eddie Murphy, but not annoying) Weaver recalled that "growing up in Danville, Illinois, dreaming about making a better world, a few of his friends dreamed of growing up to become President of the United States – imagine that! A Black man from Illinois running for president ..." he said.

But Weaver's dreams were challenged when he took a job aptitude test as a senior in high school. The person who gave him the results said they showed he was only suited for manual labor and should find a job working with his hands. "There is nothing wrong with working with one's hands," said Weaver. "But I wanted to change the world, and I could not do it with my hands alone."

He was devastated, but he didn't give up: "I knew life could never be defined by one ultra-high stakes test." He went on to college, becoming a teacher and then an Association Officer and President of the NEA.

Under his leadership, NEA spoke out against the unfairness of No Child Left Behind. Today, he said, "the tide has turned" because Americans now understand that "NCLB has not lifted enough children and it has beaten too many down. Weaver said that NEA membership grew 22% during his presidency despite predictions, when he started, that NEA would lose members.

Still, Weaver said, "NEA and public schools face serious problems and challenges ahead." Today, he said, "Americans want a change, and Team NEA – we must lead this change."

NEA President, Reg Weaver, called for a new national commitment to public education.

In addition to the many tributes given Mr. Weaver, the "NEA Friendship Night'08" was held in his honor. It was a wonderful event with live music, dancing and celebration.

On July 4th, as with all other meeting days, the NEA tracked a full agenda of association business. State delegations attended wearing the full spectrum of patriotic attire on this, our nation's 232nd birthday. Red, white, and blue dominated the rainbow of colorful and creative outfits worn, including tie-dye. Executive Director, John Wilson, opened with a salute to veterans and active members of the armed forces.

Wilson went on to state, "Education is the cornerstone of our democracy and America's success story." Wilson said, "At a time when the administration (Federal) is focused on promoting democracy overseas, we should also take a look at what we need to keep our democracy thriving right here at home."

The all NEA Choir preformed a moving medley of patriotic tunes with sing-along. There was also a tribute to Barbara Morgan, NASA's second Educator Astronaut and NEA member. She was awarded the 2008 Friend of Education Award and accepted the award "on behalf of everyone in the hall because everyone here is a friend of education," she said, Astronaut Morgan concluded by presenting Reg Weaver with a personal memento from first teacher astronaut, Christa McAuliffe. As you might imagine, this was a very touching moment in the ceremony.

Later, NEA overwhelming voted to endorse Senator Barack Obama for President of the United States.

That night, I watched the Forth of July fire works exhibition on the National Mall near the Washington Monument. It doesn't get much better than that!

The following day we heard from Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, via live video feed direct from Butte, Montana. In his speech to assembly, Sen. Obama pledged to fix "the broken promises of No Child Left Behind," and laid out his 50 State Plan to take back the Whitehouse in November. He went on to state, "I am running for President of the United States to give every child the best possible chance at life."

“I am tired of hearing teachers blamed for our problems,” Obama stated.

“I want to lead a new era of mutual responsibility in education, One where we all come together, parents and educators, the NEA and leaders in Washington, citizens all across America united for the sake of our children’s success,” he proclaimed.

“Forcing our teachers to spend their time teaching to the test at the expense of music and art and the 21st century skills necessary to compete in this world – that’s wrong,” said Obama.

“Labeling a school and its students as failures one day and abandoning them the next – that’s wrong,” he continued.

“So we must fix the failures of No Child Left Behind.”

“We must provide the funding that was promised and give the states the resources they need and finally meet our commitment to special education,” stated Obama.

Senator Obama also said, “I am opposed to the using of public money for private school vouchers.”

“Now finally,” he said, we all know that there is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child’s education from day one to make sure that the child is in school on time, a parent who helps them with homework and attends those parent-teacher conferences, who is willing to turn off the TV once in a while and put away the video games and read to their child.”

Obama outlined his commitment to education stating, “We have to hold ourselves accountable, not just our schools, not just our teachers, but our parents, community, and our president.”

“That’s the kind of leadership I want to provide when I am in the White House.”

Obama went on to say that he would, “always be an honest partner to you (teachers) in the White House and explained that both his wife and sister are teachers.

Senator Obama’s complete speech at the 2008 NEA Assembly is available on line at the www.nea.org website.

The delegates also voted to approve the recommendation of the NEA Board of Directors, to elect Vice President Dennis Van Roekel as the new NEA President-elect: Lily Ekelsen to be Vice President-elect: Secretary-Treasure-elect Becky Pringle. Princess Moss of Virginia and Len Paolillo of Massachusetts won seats on the NEA Executive Committee. The new NEA Leaders will officially take office on October 1 of this year.

NEA President-Elect Dennis Van Roekel, in his address to the assembly, he explained how he grew up in small town Iowa and decided in the 7th grade that he wanted to become a teacher. After becoming a math teacher he became active in his local association becoming their grievance chair. Van Roekel stated that he became how he came to his first Representative Assembly of the NEA in 1980 and he had thought about what a tough act it would be to follow the five presidents that he had seen since then. Van Roekel stressed the need for change and explained how “some felt that with change comes stress.” He went on to say that “resisting change is what causes stress.” “The moment you think you can stop it, that’s when it will cause you stress,” said Van Roekel. He continued, “There is only one person that you can really change and that is yourself.”

“It is only through dissatisfaction that with what exists that you’re willing to do whatever is necessary to change it. I can tell you in 2008, I am not satisfied,” stated Van Roekel. He went on to express dissatisfaction with the growing drop out rate, unequal access to schools, and the inequitable and insufficient resources given to schools.

“The richest and most powerful nation in the world cannot provide for its children. Cannot provide health care, cannot provide education. Something is wrong – it needs to change,” stated Van Roekel.

Van Roekel challenged the RA participants to make this coming year the beginning of the era of hope, possibilities and opportunities.

“I hope that when they look back at us and say, “That was the group that had the audacity to dream big. They had the courage to act, they had the ability to act, to influence to make difference, and they had the power to make it happen,” said Van Roekel. He received a rousing ovation from the crowd for his encouraging message.

The final day of business concluded when Reg Weaver hammered the gavel at 8:26 PM proclaiming the “2008 NEA Assembly adjourned.”

As you know, as a member of your local Antelope Valley Teacher’s Association you are receiving the benefits of local representation, including collective bargaining rights, grievance protections, improved working conditions, better relationships between district leadership and school board members, and many other services and rights, not to mention the great social activities.

At the State level, the CTA represents all of its members by promoting our interests in Sacramento, protecting public school funding and promoting legislation that has a positive impact on students and teachers, and we know that they will speak up for us against those who want to take away our rights, reduce school funding and impede our abilities to provide the best possible opportunities for educating our children. The CTA also provides scholarships, conferences and workshops for teachers, students and families.

I have seen first hand how critical the work of the NEA is at giving us representation at the national level. 2008 will be a great year with even better yet to come. The National Education Association continues to fight to re-write No Child Left Behind, overturn the unfair Social Security Offset penalty that punishes teachers, police and firefighters by denying or reducing their retirement benefits. It is Team NEA that lobbies congress for improved funding and legislation that positively impacts public education.

I will conclude my report with words Mr. Van Roekel stated earlier that final day at the 2008 RA. “...and like most of you in the room, you soon learn that being a teacher is only half the job. The other half is being part of this organization. You can’t do half a job. If you care about the students you teach, if you want to make a difference in their lives, if you want to advocate for what they believe in, you have to go where the decision makers are.”

“And, I got involved in this organization, and it has been part of my life ever since. The education and the association work are hand in hand, one in the same,” he proclaimed.

Thank you.
Gerald Fairman, Delegate
2008 National Education Association

