



Cover Story: You've Got the POWER!

Collective action requires more than numbers—it takes dedicated members working together

By Stephenie Overman

Free food. Free tee-shirts. An appearance by the starting quarterback and his teammates.

It may have looked like any college rally on the surface, but it was actually a lively display of collective action. The event at the University of Colorado at Boulder was part of NEA's "Got Tuition?" campaign, which is aimed at combating the soaring cost of college education.

The campaign is just one example of how having a collective voice as a member of the National Education Association can create real change that affects your life—as a student, throughout your teaching career, and even in retirement.

Through the power of collective action, the campaign had a substantive win in 2007 and took a big step toward easing the college affordability crisis facing students and their families.



NEA efforts helped pass the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, which cuts in half the interest rates on subsidized student loans, increases the Pell Grant program, and creates new TEACH grants for students who pledge to teach in schools serving low-income students for at least four years upon graduation.

The campaign lives on because there's much more to do. You can join NEA in advocating for legislation that would lower interest rates, limit the percentage of income you spend repaying loans, reinstate refinancing of existing loans, and encourage public service careers by expanding loan forgiveness programs for critical public service professions such as teaching.

Having the chance to work with your colleagues to affect change on the issues that matter to you won't end when you get your degree. Your Association membership as an active teacher means you're part of a community with a local, state, and national presence that has a collective voice that cannot be silenced. That's important, whether you're advocating for professional salaries for educators, protecting your benefits package during bargaining, or letting legislators know how crucial education funding is for public schools.

At the University of Colorado, the two-day "Got Tuition?" event coincided with a nationally televised football game against West Virginia so "we were handing out [black] "Got Tuition?" shirts for students to wear to the game. Our school colors are black and gold," explains Joshua Childs, a graduate student in the university's education policy and practice program. Childs is chapter president and student vice chairperson of the Colorado Education Association.

Childs and his colleagues also handed out flyers about college affordability. They took part in a news conference along with starting Colorado quarterback Cody Hawkins and some of his teammates.

The high cost of college education "affects everyone because they are paying [high tuition]," says Childs. "People in student government—Young Democrats, Young Republicans—all understand why college affordability is so important."

It's especially important that students going into areas of public service, such as teaching, work together to reduce the high cost of tuition because throughout their careers "they are giving back to their communities. They shouldn't have such high student loans.. The collective group coming together brings awareness and forces change on policy makers. It can change the way college is funded," says Childs.

The "Got Tuition?" campaign plays out in different ways at colleges across the United States. Rallies on Wyoming campuses also included free snacks and tee-shirts. In addition, to emphasize the importance of collective action, a county clerk was on hand to register students to vote.



Part of the plan was to promote the NEA Student Program, says Student Wyoming Education Association President Aaron Merkin, an elementary education senior at the University of Wyoming, Laramie.

But at the heart of the Wyoming efforts were students and active professional members working together, with the help of WEA staff, to draw awareness to common concerns.

In fact, the effort to reach Wyoming students grew out of a campaign to recruit faculty members, explains WEA President Kathryn Valido. "We sent staff people to organize [faculty] on campuses and, in the course of doing that, we decided it was important that we look at the association's presence at every level."

Events for students and professionals were set up "to make sure everybody was aware of each other, of how they could benefit each other. We broke bread together," she says. Valido called it an eye opener for the students to see that they and faculty members had so much common interest.

"We talked about the things that the Association does that can benefit them as they are matriculating. They had questions about unions. They didn't know that NEA is the kind of professional resource center that it is. They were excited by the notion that the Association could be a central clearinghouse" for them, she says, because students often feel isolated.

And, of course, the college affordability issue was "a huge part" of the discussion.

WEA can point with pride to the recent success of its collective action efforts, according to Ron Sniffin, the state Association's communications director. Last year, WEA successfully fought for "20-18-10," which increased community college faculty salaries by 20 percent, core staff salaries by 18 percent, and administrative salaries by 10 percent.

The state Association's resources benefit students in many ways, Sniffin says. "There's the statewide student conference where we provide students with professional growth and educational opportunities. There are opportunities to network with each other and with educators and administrators, people who could potentially hire them."

Aaron Merkin also speaks appreciatively of the opportunities NEA offers. When he transferred to Wyoming from Chicago in 2006, he became a local officer, then state student president, and has been appointed to the national advisory committee that helps run the 60,000-plus member NEA Student Program.

"There's an amazing networking experience around the country. You learn about issues, about job opportunities, about ideas to bring back to your classroom as a student," Merkin says. "There's no downside to being a member. They're fighting for educators every day. They're looking out for you."

Sarah Odachowski, a new second-grade teacher at Park Lawn Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia, also says there's great opportunity in being part of a network of 3.2 million educators nationwide.

Being active in the NEA Student Program prepared her for being an educator, both inside and outside the classroom. In college, students learn how to teach and what to teach, but they seldom learn about the political aspects of the profession, Odachowski says.

"I've become more aware of how hard people have to work for what they want in the profession and how it really does pay off in the end," adding that, out in the world, "you learn how beneficial it is to be part of NEA."

Odachowski was chairperson of the Student Education Association of Massachusetts while she attended Westfield State College, "so when I graduated, it wasn't a question of whether I was joining [NEA]. I knew I was joining. I approached the building rep and signed up."



She is now a member of the Fairfax Education Association and the Virginia Education Association, where she has "gotten my foot in the door a little bit."

In time, Odachowski plans to become more active and has already been recommended for leadership training, but as a new teacher, "I need to focus on my career and get that under control," she says. "Student teaching can't fully prepare you for what you're going to feel when 17 little seven-year-olds are looking up at you for direction. I need to feel comfortable in the school," before taking on a leadership role in the union.

The idea of taking collective action on behalf of educators and education has inspired Dawn Shephard Pope to be involved with NEA at the local, state, and national levels. The North Carolina State University graduate was NEA student chairperson 2002-04 and is currently a high school business and marketing education teacher in Raleigh, North Carolina.

North Carolina is one of the right-to-work states that bans traditional collective bargaining—but the Association can still have a major impact there. In fact, "I might argue that we have more of a responsibility to be involved" in collective action, says Pope, who sees it as part of the Association's job to educate the state legislators who make the decisions about school days and teacher pay. (For more on right-to-work states and other bargaining terms, see the sidebar, "A Place at the Table.")

"We invite legislators into the school for a day; we help them to better understand what we do so they have firsthand experience. We've built a relationship with them over the years, and they look to us" on education-related issues, says Pope, linking classroom issues to union issues.

"Student achievement is what should drive everything. Working conditions are learning conditions—if you're in a shabby building, if a teacher is sick but is unable to take leave, that has an impact on

student learning. Education employees' conditions impact student conditions."

In North Carolina, the union successfully pushed for a day of personal leave, evaluation of administrators, and a working conditions survey.

In other school districts across the country, NEA bargaining units have negotiated contracts that ensure educators have a voice in curriculum development, textbook choice, discipline procedures, and yes, even school bell schedules. That's why educators so value having a collective voice: because it gives them more say on the issues that affect them every day in the classroom.

The union also offers a sense of community, which is important because the first few years of teaching "are a tough time," says Pope, who now has five years' experience in the classroom. New teachers can ask questions of more experienced colleagues, and share ideas and concerns. "It helps to have the resources from the Association. It gives a new educator a better chance to stay, to be successful."

If you're a new graduate, Pope urges you to get involved with the union "at a level that's comfortable for you. It could be going to just one event. Everyone's busy, but whatever you can do is appreciated. The more people who are involved in the collective process, the more impact you can have."

Collective action has power at every stage of your career, as Jon-Paul Roden can attest.

Roden, president of the Connecticut Education Association-Retired, is proud of the work that CEA has done to make sure teachers receive the pensions they have earned.

"Our pension was traditionally underfunded. We tried different legislative approaches, but we finally came up with the idea of selling bonds, which would cost the state less. The state saved money, and we got a guarantee," he says.

Following an impressive statewide lobbying campaign spearheaded by CEA, the state legislature passed a bill allowing the sale of up to \$2 billion in bonds to help save the Connecticut Teachers' Retirement Fund.

"The day a brand-new [Connecticut] teacher signs a contract, that teacher is guaranteed the pension that exists at that time. It's a huge thing for new teachers," Roden notes.

NEA plays an important role throughout a teacher's career, says Roden. "As a student member, then an active member during your classroom teaching time, and even after you close out your career, [membership] gives you the opportunity to stay connected and get member benefits.

When you retire, you retire from your teaching position only, not from your continued interest in the teaching profession. One of the big draws of membership [in NEA] is staying connected."

Got Tuition?

College costs are soaring, average household incomes are falling, and federal student aid is lagging behind. The U.S. Department of Education reports that nearly two-thirds of college students owe on average more than \$19,000.

In response to this crisis NEA launched "Got Tuition?," a national, nonpartisan effort to mobilize voters to press elected officials to take action on college affordability and the growing student debt in America.

Get involved! Sign a petition, share your story, and forward the info to friends at <http://www.gottuition.org/>.

Unions, Yes?

You appreciate the value of collective action, but what do your peers think? It turns out that the newest members of the U.S. workforce are giving labor unions better marks than their older counterparts did at the same age.

America's workers 18- to 29-years-old, polled by a Washington think tank, gave unions an average ranking of 60 on a 0-to-100 scale (with 0 indicating a negative view and 100 being a positive view). That's the second-highest level of support of any age group in the more than 40 years the question has been asked, according to the Center for American Progress (CAP).

But CAP's report, "The Progressive Generation: How Young Adults Think About the Economy," finds that these young workers have had the least direct exposure to unions of any recent generation. That's because although the number of U.S. workers belonging to a union rose slightly in 2007, up to 15.7 million, that's still only about 12 percent of the population.

As a teacher, you're more likely to have firsthand knowledge about unions. The public sector has a union membership rate nearly five times that of private sector employees. Education, training, and library occupations have the highest unionization rate among all occupations, at 37.2 percent.

Another study—this one by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) in Washington, D.C.—spells out reasons young workers may be attracted to unions.

According to the report, "Unions and Upward Mobility for Young Workers," employees ages 18 to 29 earn about 10 percent less overall than their counterparts did in 1979—in spite of impressive gains in young workers' educational attainment over the same time period.

But young workers who join a union earn, on average, 12.4 percent more than their nonunion peers. And young union workers are 17 percentage points more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and 24 percentage points more likely to have an employer-provided pension plan than young workers who were not in unions.

The findings demonstrate that young workers who are able to bargain collectively earn more and are more likely to have benefits associated with good jobs, according to author John Schmitt, a CEPR senior economist. He says the information suggests that better protection of workers' right to unionize would have a substantial positive impact on the pay and benefits of young workers.

—S. O.

A Place at the Table

You'll do a lot of learning as well as teaching in your first years out of school. One thing you'll learn about is the rewards and responsibilities of the collective bargaining process.

Basically, collective bargaining is the negotiation of a contract — including wages, benefits, and working conditions — between employers and employees.

What your union rights are depends upon which state you live in. Some states are "right-to-work," which means that unions can't negotiate agreements that require all employees to pay for the costs of union representation. Such agreements eliminate "free riders" who enjoy the benefits of an agreement without supporting or joining the union.

But remember, having a collective voice and the resources of a 3.2-million member organization like NEA offers great protection and opportunity no matter where you live.

As a union member you become part of a bargaining unit, a community of people with identifiable common interests represented by one authorized union.

Organizing is key to the bargaining equation. The greatest strength comes not just from numbers, but from the number of informed and engaged members who work together to lobby for change, seek improvements in their working conditions, or work for any other important step that members determine is a priority.

When it's time for representatives of your unit to sit down at the bargaining table to fight for your pay increases and benefits, you'll have an experienced association staff to help.

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They do research, as well as planning public relations campaigns to make the public understand the importance of properly paying educators. NEA also offers training to help members sharpen bargaining skills.

Keep in mind that the contract your bargaining team first proposes to management is unlikely to be the contract that is eventually signed.

"All contracts involve a degree of negotiation and potentially a degree of compromise," says Rebecca Givan, an assistant professor at Cornell University who specializes in collective bargaining. "You're dealing with budget constraints, but you can come up with something that both sides should be able to live with."

Givan stresses that the union not only helps you collectively, but also individually when problems arise involving students, parents, administrators, or working conditions.

— S. O.