

The NEA's Unrepresentative Assembly

By J. Stanley Marshall

The 85th Representative Assembly of the National Education Association (NEA) just adjourned in Orlando. This year it drew some 9,000 delegates -- fewer than last year but still the nation's largest gathering of K-12 educators.

This year's meeting was more notable for what the NEA didn't do than for anything it did. There was no resolution on creating an exit strategy from Iraq or advocating gay or lesbian issues in undergraduate teacher programs, as in the past.

Instead, the NEA's top item of business was to call for changes in the federal "No Child Left Behind" law, which the union calls "fundamentally flawed." Delegates approved a plan that would essentially gut the program but said little about what should replace it. Delegates also approved a resolution demanding more money for public education, including a nationally mandated salary of at least \$40,000 a year for starting teachers.

Count me as one who would like to see teachers earn more. However, the union's focus on more money for education cannot be allowed to mask the fact that in many schools, sizeable increases in spending have yielded no improvement in student performance.

Increasing teacher's pay is an article of faith with many Americans. Good teachers are the *sine qua non* for good schools, and it's undeniable that one good teacher can make or break learning for her or his students.

While the NEA and its Florida unit, the FEA, constantly push for higher salaries, many teachers have other concerns. In the Florida Department of Education's 2004 survey of departing teachers, only 3.2 percent of the 8,600 surveyed ranked pay as their main reason for leaving. Ranking higher were four reasons: relocation, family/personal matters, retirement, and "other," which included starting a business and relocation of spouse. The top reason, relocation, was cited by 31.5 percent of the teachers. This indicates that many teachers simply moved.

That survey confirms what many of us in education have suspected all along. Teaching is selected as a career for various reasons, including the opportunity for a deeply rewarding vocation, a shortened work year, and the freedom to pursue other interests during the summer. Money is a factor, of course, but many teachers could take better paying jobs if they wished, but they don't. Instead, they stay because they like teaching and find the rewards adequate.

My personal impression, after many years of speaking with teachers and principals about their professional concerns, is that recognition and appreciation would mean a lot and would yield handsome dividends in the recruiting and retention of teachers.

A billboard sponsored by the Florida Nurses Association gets my attention every time I pass it. Featuring a photo of a woman with a stethoscope, the sign bears a pithy message about nurses:

“The first to respond. The last to leave. Saving lives everyday.” A comparable sign featuring a teacher and pupils might conclude, “*Changing* lives everyday.”

Meanwhile, teachers’ effectiveness in changing lives or conveying knowledge was evidently not a factor as the NEA delegates honored 13 people for their “contributions to education.” A careful examination of the honorees’ “contributions” says a good bit about the NEA and its agenda.

One award recipient was honored for advocating the clearing of land mines, another for Holocaust research, yet another for chronicling the African-American military experience, and still another for his advocacy of worker’s rights. Efforts to improve the lives of gay and lesbian youth were recognized, as was a program advocating theater as a way to share the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students.

Those causes may be worthy, but this was a teachers’ convention. Of the 13 recipients who were honored, only two appeared to be teachers, while two others were retired teachers. Moreover, no award was presented to a teacher for exemplifying great skill and dedication or achieving results in the classroom.

Meeting in Orlando, the NEA might have looked down the road to Lakeland, where legendary English teacher Hazel Haley recently retired after a 69-year-long career that was celebrated on national TV and in countless publications.

The omission reveals a truth about the NEA and its Florida chapter, the FEA. It’s not a professional association; it’s a labor union, and it does just what labor unions are designed to do. That surely explains why fewer than half of Florida’s teachers join.

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