

# Education's Iron Triangle: Uncovering the Values and Beliefs of the NEA, AFT, and PTA

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Any systematic examination of the American education system must address the organizations exerting significant influence over it. None are more influential than the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). These organizations, what we call "The Iron Triangle" individually and collectively dwarf any other educational organization in the United States. In terms of influence, each courts and is courted by the nation's most powerful policymakers. Their networks and representation in schools remains unparalleled. One, the PTA, enjoys status as a household name.

However, many, perhaps most people involved in education, parents, teachers, administrators, scholars etc., know little about the agendas these organizations promote and seek to perpetuate in and through education, specifically their political and social agendas. "While most parents have a favorable impression of the PTA," concludes a Wirthlin poll, "an overwhelming majority, 82 percent, are totally unaware of the organization's political and lobbying activities."<sup>1</sup> Many recognize the NEA and AFT as unions ostensibly representing the interests of teachers and identify the PTA as an organization of parents supporting local schools. While these descriptions may be accurate, they also underestimate and conceal their scope of interests and far-reaching agendas.

Thus, this examination seeks primarily to answer the questions: What are the political and social agendas of the NEA, AFT, and PTA? How do the agendas of these groups attempt to restrict the freedom of families? Here we consider each organization individually, followed by a discussion of the synergistic alliance shared among the three groups. To discern their values and beliefs, this paper utilizes resolutions, publications, websites, and IRS documents. Various newspaper and academic articles provided further information, specifically recent events, historical accounts, and quotations. The experiences and documents of teachers and parents who are or were members of the NEA, AFT, or PTA were also used. These experiences and documents provided further background, and some of their quotations are used throughout. Finally, the authors' original research provides direct data, including attendance at annual conventions or membership in the organizations.

## **NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION**

The National Education Association (NEA) is the largest teachers union in the world and one of the nation's most powerful. Although formed in 1857 as a professional organization for teachers, college professors, and administrators, by the 1960s it began representing teachers as a union in collective bargaining.<sup>2</sup> Its more than 2.6 million members<sup>3</sup> comprise 68% of the public school teachers, or 60% of all elementary and secondary teachers in the United States.<sup>4</sup> It has affiliates in every state and in more than 13,000 local communities across

the United States.<sup>5</sup> Through the help of collective bargaining laws, membership dues, and agency-fees, it receives nearly \$1 billion in estimated annual revenues.<sup>6</sup> With such vast membership and enormous financial resources, the NEA alone has been called the single most powerful force in education.<sup>7</sup> As such, what it believes about social and political issues is consequential.

### Social Agenda

#### Abortion:

NEA resolution I-12 states, "The National Education Association supports family planning, including the right to reproductive freedom."<sup>8</sup> The NEA defines "reproductive freedom" as a woman's right to have an abortion.<sup>9</sup> It also "urge[s] the government to give high priority to making available all methods of family planning to women and men unable to take advantage of private facilities."<sup>10</sup> The NEA calls for such "services" to be provided in schools. "The Association also urges the implementation of community-operated, school-based family planning clinics that will provide intensive counseling by trained personnel."<sup>11</sup>

Nearly every year at the NEA's Representative Assembly, members opposed to the NEA's pro-abortion stand attempt to eliminate or undermine it. Such attempts are routinely denied by NEA staff, officers, and delegates. In 2001, pro-life NEA members attempted several different strategies, including the introduction of an amendment scuttling Resolution I-12 and two "new business" items. As in years past, their efforts were crushed.<sup>12</sup> The amendment to I-12 called for the removal of the phrase "reproductive freedom" from the resolution. Immediately after the amendment's introduction, another delegate led the fight against it by calling for "opposition to consider." NEA rules require a two-thirds majority to not consider proposed amendments, and overwhelmingly, the delegates voted "not to consider."

One of the new business items called on the NEA to "educate its members about the need to anesthetize pre-born children, once sensitivity to pain has been established, before an abortion procedure begins." The other item would have required the NEA to "educate its members about the need for life-preserving measures to be used when a child is aborted alive." Delegates voted not to consider either item.<sup>13</sup>

#### Homosexuality:

According to resolution B-38 on sex education, the NEA believes information about the "diversity of sexual orientation" should be included in sex education classes.<sup>14</sup> Resolution B-9 states the NEA's efforts to inform students about "diversity of sexual orientation" would include plans, activities, and programs that "increase acceptance, and sensitivity to individuals and groups in a diverse society composed of such groups as gays and lesbians."<sup>15</sup>

Further, NEA President Bob Chase offered a strong endorsement of a pro-homosexual video for students entitled "It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School." He stated, "Schools cannot be neutral when we're dealing with [homosexual] issues. I'm not talking about tolerance. I'm talking about acceptance. 'It's Elementary' is a great resource for parents, teachers, and community leaders."<sup>16</sup>

In 1999, the NEA's staff joined with several other homosexual advocacy groups to create a publication encouraging schools to provide a nurturing environment for gays and lesbians and which also attempts to discredit the testimonies of ex-gays.<sup>17</sup> Entitled *Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth*, 15,000 of these booklets were distributed to principals, teachers, and school personnel around the nation.<sup>18</sup> Chase personally approved the booklet,<sup>19</sup> and its cover bears the NEA's stamp of endorsement.<sup>20</sup>

In 2000, Chase gave a controversial keynote address at the October convention of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), an influential gay-rights organization.<sup>21</sup> In 2001, the NEA considered a new version of its Resolution B that would have expanded the current language, including calls for the "involvement of gay educators in developing educational material," and holding up "gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender education employees as role models."<sup>22</sup>

While NEA leadership prioritizes this issue, NEA membership does not. An internal survey reveals such promotion of homosexuality concerns its own members. The NEA's survey quotes its own members, several of whom said: "The NEA cares more about gay rights than kids."<sup>23</sup>

### School Choice

The following resolutions indicate the NEA's strong stands against educational options giving more power and responsibility to parents: "Home Schooling" (B-67),<sup>24</sup> "Parental Option Plans" (A-28),<sup>25</sup> and "Vouchers and Tax Credits" (A-29).<sup>26</sup> The NEA has also resisted charter schools. One study of the first 11 states that adopted charter schools revealed much of the opposition to the laws came from teachers unions. In Michigan and Minnesota, NEA state affiliates intimidated and threatened universities planning to start charter schools.<sup>27</sup> State affiliates announced they would, among other things, use their power to hinder university students from student teaching in the community.<sup>28</sup> In Minnesota, union opposition to charter schools continues despite the success of charter schools nationwide.<sup>29</sup>

In other examples, an NEA state lobbyist slandered school choice supporters: "My reaction is that any group pushing for a voucher plan is basically racist in nature."<sup>30</sup> Bob Chase described vouchers as "applying leeches and bleeding a patient to death."<sup>31</sup> Religious Groups and Parents. The NEA's resolution C-14 condemns "extremist" groups,<sup>32</sup> which union publications define as groups or parents with a conservative religious affiliation. State affiliates of the NEA held seminars on dealing with critics from "the radical right," "the extreme right," or "fundamentalists." The NEA further characterizes these "extremists" or "censors" as "members of an ultra-conservative, fundamentalist, charismatic or Pentecostal faith"<sup>33</sup> and as "salt of the earth, concerned parents; absolutist in their beliefs."<sup>34</sup> They are "ultra-conservative individuals, often holding extremist points of view, who use religion or the church to further their own objectives"<sup>35</sup> and who employ techniques such as "name-calling and/or personal attacks on an individual or an organization rather than dealing with the issues."<sup>36</sup>

The NEA specifically warns against groups such as Concerned Women for America, Eagle Forum, Family Research Council, Christian Coalition, American Family Association, Focus on the Family, and the Traditional Values Coalition.<sup>37</sup> According to the NEA, these groups' "aggressive campaigns, large followings, and strong-arm tactics divide communities and disrupt the work of public schools."<sup>38</sup> NEA-published papers or seminars attacking conservative parents and organizations have occurred in many states, including California,<sup>39</sup> Illinois,<sup>40</sup> Michigan,<sup>41</sup> New Jersey,<sup>42</sup> Ohio,<sup>43</sup> and Washington.<sup>44</sup>

### A Non-Education Agenda:

In addition to stands on issues like abortion and homosexuality, the NEA's agenda also includes resolutions and positions far afield from education. At one national convention, the NEA voted to boycott Florida orange juice because radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh served as a spokesman.<sup>45</sup> The union also continues to support, among others, a nuclear freeze,<sup>46</sup> statehood for Washington, DC,<sup>47</sup> reparation of Native American remains,<sup>48</sup> a world court,<sup>49</sup> and blocking telemarketing.<sup>50</sup>

## Political Agenda

### Political Spending:

Key to the NEA's power is its political spending. To maximize its influence, the NEA often contributes to other organizations, forming political and ideological coalitions. For example, during the 1990s, recipients of NEA financial support included the National Organization for Women (NOW),<sup>51</sup> the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation,<sup>52</sup> the Human Rights Campaign Fund,<sup>53</sup> and People for the American Way (PAW). PAW alone received \$654,000 from the NEA in the past decade. <sup>54</sup> The NEA asserts that sending hundreds of thousands of teachers' dollars to these organizations and more than 50 others like them is "beneficial to our success."<sup>55</sup>

Beyond coalition spending, the NEA's 1997-98 budget included \$24.1 million for promoting its legislative and political agenda at the national level alone.<sup>56</sup> This money does not include the lobbying and advocacy efforts by each of the NEA's state and local affiliates. Nor does it include the \$42.3 million spent by approximately 1,500 NEA field representatives, called UniServ directors, who often perform as lobbyists.<sup>57</sup> The NEA employs more full-time, paid political operatives than the Democratic and Republican parties combined.<sup>58</sup>

During the 1998 elections, the NEA (including its political action committee) ranked as the third-largest contributor to political candidates and organizations in the entire nation, topping the Teamsters (11th), the AFL-CIO (13th), and the National Rifle Association (22nd).<sup>59</sup> Of the NEA's \$3.4 million in contributions, 95% went to Democrats and 5% to Republicans.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, a 1999 Fortune magazine survey ranked the NEA ninth among the 114 most powerful lobbying groups in Washington, DC.<sup>61</sup> The NEA also ranked as the 8th highest soft money contributor in the 1998 election.<sup>62</sup> Of the \$1.1 million contributed, 97% went to Democrats, and 3% to Republicans.<sup>63</sup> For the 2000 election, the NEA budgeted \$4.9 million of members' money. Nevertheless, the union "reports to the IRS that it spends no union dues on politics."<sup>64</sup>

Contributions of the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education (NEA-Fund). According to the NEA Handbook, the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education (formerly the NEA-PAC) is "the political action arm of NEA members nationwide."<sup>65</sup> It contributes money politically in addition to the soft money described above. The NEA-Fund's goal was to raise \$7.7 million for the 2000 elections.<sup>66</sup> This does not include the estimated tens of millions of dollars more from the state and local affiliates spent towards political campaigns.<sup>67</sup>

During the 1998 elections, the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education ranked as the 8th biggest spending political action committee (PAC) in the nation.<sup>68</sup> Of the \$2.2 million contributed, 93% went to Democrats and 7% to Republicans.<sup>69</sup> Yet, only 49% of NEA members claim affiliation with the Democratic Party, 33% claim affiliation with the Republican Party, and 15% claim to be Independents.<sup>70</sup>

### Presidential Politics:

In 1976, the NEA made its first presidential endorsement, Jimmy Carter. Knowing the NEA had long supported the creation of a cabinet-level Department of Education, Carter kept a campaign promise and created the department in 1979. Bragged one NEA official, "We're the only union with our own Cabinet Department."<sup>71</sup> Since that reward, the NEA has endorsed only Democratic presidential candidates, Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and bestowed the prominent "Friend of Education" award to Democrats such as Hillary Clinton, George McGovern, and Lyndon Johnson.<sup>72</sup> Reflecting its success since 1976, this framed

statement appears in the NEA's national headquarters: "No presidential candidate who wants to win in November ignores the National Education Association anymore."<sup>73</sup>

## **AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS**

With now more than a million members nationwide,<sup>74</sup> the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is the second largest teachers union. Founded in 1916, the AFT became the first teachers union in the nation.<sup>75</sup> Today, the AFT declares it "is one of the fastest growing labor unions."<sup>76</sup> In the last two years alone the AFT has added approximately 100,000 new members,<sup>77</sup> and now receives estimated annual revenues of nearly half a billion dollars.<sup>78</sup>

### Social Agenda

#### Abortion:

In its support of abortion, the AFT mirrors its sister union, the NEA. In its resolutions, the AFT formally declares it will defend the right to abortion on demand.<sup>79</sup> It also funnels thousands of dollars of members' money to pro-abortion groups like the Institute for Women's Policy Research, National Partnership for Women and Families, and National Women's Law Center.<sup>80</sup> On its website, the AFT advertises the strongly pro-abortion National Organization for Women<sup>81</sup> and features Margaret Sanger as a "civil rights activist."<sup>82</sup> Sanger, a racist and eugenicist,<sup>83</sup> founded International Planned Parenthood, the world's largest abortion provider.<sup>84</sup>

#### Homosexuality, Bisexuality and Transgenderism:

The AFT's support and advocacy of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) issues comes in the form of political and monetary support for gay rights groups and in the perpetuation of GLBT curricula. The AFT funnels members' money to pro-homosexual advocacy groups,<sup>85</sup> such as the Whitman-Walker Clinic, whose "services are directed to all gay men and lesbians."<sup>86</sup> In its advertising, the AFT highlights various pro-homosexual organizations, including The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The union defines this as a "civil rights organization" for "lesbian and gay rights."<sup>87</sup> Also included on its long list of pro-gay political lobbying groups is the Human Rights Campaign, the largest national lesbian and gay political organization.<sup>88</sup>

Moreover, an AFT resolution states: "The AFT [should] encourage its member locals to negotiate contractual language to protect the rights of gays, lesbian and bisexual members, including spousal benefits for the domestic partners of these members."<sup>89</sup> Finally, the AFT supported a New York City school curriculum targeting six-year-olds with prohomosexual messages. Its mission was to "teach first-graders about gays and lesbians."<sup>90</sup> After parents voiced their concern, the superintendent, along with his curriculum, was removed.<sup>91</sup> The AFT responded: "The result is a victory for intolerance."<sup>92</sup> In addition, in 1999 the AFT joined the NEA in endorsing the aforementioned Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth.<sup>93</sup>

#### Parental Choice:

Ironically, the AFT once supported the notion of parental choice in education. In fact, the AFT aligned with the American Federation of Labor in 1947 and supported federal aid for private schooling.<sup>94</sup> By the latter part of the century, however, the AFT performed an abrupt about-face. Along with the NEA, the AFT now opposes a burgeoning parental choice movement. The union attacks every reform initiative, charter schools, vouchers, tax credits, and home schooling.

Generally, AFT president Sandra Feldman calls parental choice plans a "hoax"<sup>95</sup> and a "terrible threat."<sup>96</sup> When addressing school vouchers specifically, the AFT calls such plans "risky voucher scheme[s]"<sup>97</sup> and denigrates this education reform across the nation. Feldman's opposition to vouchers is so acute, she refused to consider a plan to reform a handful of cities with under-performing schools by tripling spending but offering the money through a voucher.<sup>98</sup> When Proposition 226 (a parental choice proposition in California) was defeated, Feldman stated, "This was a classic good versus evil battle, folks. And the spectacular news is: The good guys won. We defeated Proposition 226!"<sup>99</sup> Finally, the AFT opposes union-free charter schools. In 2000, the union approved a resolution that "sounds the alarm concerning the expanding charter school movement."<sup>100</sup> The AFT supports charter schools as long as the schools are subject to the same union contract regulations that other public schools operate under, such as requiring that teachers sign a union contract.

#### Off the Education Message:

Like the NEA, the AFT invests resources into a host of non-education related issues. It furthers some of its agenda through coalitions with ideological or political partners. For example, IRS documents show the AFT contributes members' money to the National Coalition Against Censorship,<sup>101</sup> a group defending child pornography<sup>102</sup> and opposed to Internet filters for school libraries.<sup>103</sup> The AFT also works with its parent organization, the AFL-CIO. In order for the AFT to receive lobbying support from the AFL-CIO, the AFT lobbies for legislation that other unions support.<sup>104</sup> Recently, the AFT joined the AFL-CIO to block trade with China, Mexico, and Canada. The AFT also addresses non-education issues directly. In the midst of president Clinton's impeachment hearings, the AFT denounced in a press release those who voted successfully to impeach Clinton, saying they were "frustrated and disguising their blatant partisanship as 'conscience'" and that the investigation was a "reckless pursuit of the President."<sup>105</sup>

#### Political Agenda

In a 2000 resolution, the AFT established a goal of "build[ing] an even more vibrant political voice by creating the most vigorous political action program in our union's history."<sup>106</sup> The AFT perpetuates this "political action program" through spending and direct campaign influence.

#### Political Spending:

In the 1998 election, the AFT ranked as the 10th largest contributor in the nation.<sup>107</sup> The union contributed \$2.5 million; 99% of it to Democrats.<sup>108</sup> This money went to campaigns in two ways: as soft money and from its political action committee (PAC), the AFT Committee on Political Education (COPE). Giving \$854,400 in soft money, the AFT was the 6th largest contributor to Democrats.<sup>109</sup> None of the AFT's 1998 soft money went to Republicans. The AFT contributed \$1.6 million in PAC money, ranking 17th in the nation. Again, 99% of the money went to Democrats.<sup>110</sup> For the 2000 election the AFT contributed \$2.9 million (total of soft money and PAC) to political candidates and organizations.<sup>111</sup> Ninety nine percent of the money funded Democrats.<sup>112</sup> Campaign Influence.

As the 2000 elections loomed, an AFT officers' report stated, "We are preparing for Election 2000 in unprecedented ways."<sup>113</sup> In the presidential race, a newsletter from the largest AFT chapter stated: "If we do not vote for the Gore-Lieberman ticket on November 7, 2000, then we are going to be in a lot of trouble when George and Dicky get control. So vote for the Democrats."<sup>114</sup> Since its founding, the AFT has never endorsed a Republican for president.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, the AFT endorsed and played a prominent role in Hillary Clinton's win in the New York Senate race.<sup>116</sup> As the election season drew to a close, Inside AFT, an AFT publication, stated, "The role of the AFT and the labor movement in the [2000] election this month was 'absolutely amazing,' and gave Vice President Al Gore the margin of victory in key states."<sup>117</sup>

In addition to their own political activity, the AFT is a prominent member of the American Federation of Labor Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). The AFL-CIO is an umbrella federation representing 68 unions and more than 13 million people.<sup>118</sup> Forbes magazine ranked the AFL-CIO as the 3rd most powerful lobbying force in the nation.<sup>119</sup> The AFT also spends members' money to fund the ACLU, People for the American Way, and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.<sup>120</sup>

## **THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS**

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is one of the nation's oldest and largest voluntary organizations.<sup>121</sup> It was founded in 1897 as simply the National Congress of Mothers, excluding teachers both from its title and membership. However, shortly thereafter the group expanded to include already organized parent-teacher associations. Eventually it adopted the name of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, which remains the organization's official title even today, though it has been known informally as the PTA since 1924.

National PTA membership reached its zenith in the early 1960s, with more than 12 million members. After decades of declining participation, the 1999 membership was 6.2 million, about the same level as in 1950.<sup>122</sup> Affiliates of the National PTA now exist in every state, the District of Columbia, and in several foreign countries where American children attend Department of Defense schools. Like the teachers unions, individual membership in the PTA requires affiliation with a local chapter, the state affiliate, and the national organization.

Members help supply the PTA's nearly \$25 million in estimated annual revenues that fund local and state chapters, the headquarters in Chicago, and the lobbying office in Washington, DC. In addition to member dues, which fund more than 80 percent of operations, PTAs receive revenue from interest on investments, convention and exhibit fees, grants, and publication sales.<sup>123</sup>

### Social Agenda

#### Family Planning and Abortion:

For decades, the national PTA has supported family planning and population control. In a letter to Focus on the Family, a former school PTA president wrote, "I can attest to their politics. They promote abortions through their 'education' programs."<sup>124</sup> In terms of policy support, the PTA advocated family planning through federal laws such as Goals 2000, which encouraged schools to establish school-based health clinics. These one-stop shopping clinics provide "for the distribution of contraceptive devices" to minors.<sup>125</sup>

PTA advocates also support state-level family planning initiatives. For example, the Texas PTA (led by Shirley Igo, then president of the Texas PTA and National PTA president 2001-2003) served on the steering committee and signed a report prepared for the state legislature by the Texas Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood Advisory Council (APPAC). Report recommendations included support for "community and school based clinics providing confidential contraception and sexual counselling [sic] and abortion referral." APPAC's report also favored allowing schools to excuse absences for clinic visits and prohibiting schools from informing parents.

Although the National PTA has no written position on abortion, state PTAs sometimes team up with other organizations to lobby for a shared agenda supporting state-level family planning initiatives. To guide its sometimes controversial legislative agenda, the California PTA, the organization's largest state affiliate, includes

the provision that "a therapeutic abortion should be voluntary and a personal decision protected by the right to privacy."<sup>126</sup>

#### Sex-Education:

The National PTA's long-standing agenda calls for a comprehensive sex education curriculum in schools.<sup>127</sup> The PTA believes "HIV/AIDS education is most effective when it is part of a sequential, comprehensive, pre- K-12 health curriculum taught in schools."<sup>128</sup> While acknowledging that the "safe sex" philosophy is not completely safe, the PTA avoids promoting abstinence. At the same time, the PTA stresses that "Adolescents need to know that AIDS is now quickly spreading among heterosexuals."<sup>129</sup> Yet, no mention is made that homosexuals make up the highest percent of AIDS cases in America.<sup>130</sup>

Also alarming was the PTA's support for President Bill Clinton's appointment of Dr. Joycelyn Elders as the U.S. Surgeon General. In 1993, the National PTA Vice President for Legislative Activity wrote a strong letter of support to President Clinton, praising Dr. Elders' record of "expanding public health programs for children and teens." that "mirror National PTA objectives for federal health care policy."<sup>131</sup>

Throughout her tenure as Surgeon General, Dr. Elders, who described herself as the "condom queen" and kept a "condom tree" on her desk, advocated programs of sex education that began in kindergarten and included condom distribution through public schools.<sup>132</sup> Among a multitude of other extraordinary statements, Dr. Elders also ridiculed those opposed to abortion, telling them to "get over their love affair with fetuses."<sup>133</sup> When Dr. Elders expressed her view that "masturbation perhaps should be taught," in a speech at the United Nations on World AIDS Day, President Clinton fired her.<sup>134</sup>

#### Homosexuality:

As with abortion, the PTA claims no formal position on homosexuality, although Victoria Duran, program director for the National PTA, stated her group "is opposed to all discrimination on the basis of race, gender, national origin, language, religion, age, disability or sexual orientation."<sup>135</sup> Further, the PTA's position is clear from its own publication "Talking with your Teen about Sex,"<sup>136</sup> endorsements for gay films, numerous state level proposals, and positions on initiatives such as Oregon's Measure 9. The PTA strongly opposed and fought Measure 9, which would have prohibited public learning institutions from promoting homosexuality.<sup>137</sup>

In "Talking with your Teen about Sex," the PTA lists "forms of sexuality" as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual and tells parents that "You must learn to accept that you cannot and should not control your child's sexuality."<sup>138</sup> When the pro-gay film "It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School" was released, the Minnesota PTA promptly issued a strong endorsement.<sup>139</sup> In 1998, Debra Chasnoff, the film's lesbian producer/director credited as "most moving, what the PTAs have done" in support of her video. In her comments to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network conference in Oakland, Chasnoff said PTAs have shown the film, elected gay leaders, formed "tolerance committees," and held panel discussions without representation from the "right wing."<sup>140</sup> Chasnoff's latest gay advocacy film, "That's a Family!" also enjoys PTA support. In this film, targeted specifically at children, colorful animation and the voices of schoolaged children proclaim the message that homosexuality is normal and that a family with same-sex parents is the moral equivalent of a family with a mother and a father. When the film was screened at the White House on December 19, 2000, PTA president Ginny Markell was one of the ceremony's speakers.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, the National PTA will include the film in a new program on accepting differences in the classroom.<sup>142</sup>



In state-level efforts, the Colorado PTA drafted a resolution to "recommend that Colorado schools promote awareness about alternative lifestyles and condemn discrimination against homosexuals, bisexuals, and transsexuals." If passed, the proposed resolution would have amended the national, state, and local PTA nondiscrimination clauses to include "gender or sexuality" along with race, ethnic background, and religion. A Colorado PTA official defended the proposal as a way to oppose "discrimination and harassment" against homosexual students and to provide information to school counselors.<sup>143</sup> It was eventually rejected by delegates to the Colorado PTA convention.

Another state-level initiative enjoyed the national organization's approval, formation of a Gay/Lesbian chapter in Greater Puget Sound, Washington.<sup>144</sup> Many rank-and-file PTA members saw the formation of the PTA affiliate as "just another effort to create a forum for homosexual activists to activate their agenda in the public schools."<sup>145</sup> In January of this year the National PTA Board passed its "Respect for Differences" position statement that reads in part: "National PTA opposes discrimination on the basis of race, gender, national origin, language, religion, age, physical and academic ability and sexual orientation" (emphasis added). By passing this position statement, the national leaders have gone against the concerns of rank and file members.<sup>146</sup>

#### Public Schools Only:

Despite the fact that over five million students matriculate in non-public schools, these institutions receive no support from the PTA.<sup>147</sup> Instead, the national PTA's official position states the "future of our free public schools is threatened by legislation that would provide federal support for nonpublic schools."<sup>148</sup>

In opposing alternative forms of schooling, the PTA opposes vouchers, tuition tax credits, and deductions for education expenses. Along with the teacher unions, the California and Michigan PTAs actively worked to defeat voucher initiatives in their respective states in 2000.<sup>149</sup> Nor does the PTA give any consideration to the value of competition to the public schools from private schools. Instead, it focuses only on lobbying decision-makers for increased funding for public education. Even charter schools, publicly funded schools with local trustees, fail to receive support from the PTA as viable educational alternatives.

As for home schools, the PTA lumps them with "other non-approved schools." It calls for state legislatures to require certification of home school teachers.<sup>150</sup> The PTA also denounced home schools and urged State Boards of Education "to require home and other non-approved schools to meet the same minimum educational standards as public schools," including "hours and days of instruction, curriculum, teacher certification and reporting" requirements.<sup>151</sup>

#### Religious Groups and Parents:

Although membership is not restricted to public school parents, the PTA's rules, messages, and positions discourage parents and teachers in religious schools from joining. Certainly the PTA's condemnation of tax deductions and credits for religious school expenses deter those parents from supporting the PTA. Further, in its Advocacy Training Manual, the PTA identifies private school coalitions and conservative think tanks among its opponents when organizing a public issues campaign.<sup>152</sup> It denounces and dismisses religious individuals and groups as "the far right."<sup>153</sup>

For example, at the May 1994 state PTA convention in Indianapolis, Herbert Grover, a national PTA vice-president led a discussion entitled "Extremely Sensitive: PTA's Guide to Extremism." He warned of a political conspiracy by the "Christian Right" who promote "stealth candidates," saying that "these people" have become "political activists for the last 10 or 15 years under the guise of the moral majority."<sup>154</sup>

In National PTA convention workshops, its leaders advise delegates on how to "develop an awareness of the methods and strategies of extremist members or groups on school health curriculum and education reform issues."<sup>155</sup> Leaving no doubt about whom the PTA deemed "extremist," the PTA's head lobbyist cited the following: Christian Coalition, Free Congress Foundation, Family Research Council, Concerned Women for America, Eagle Forum, Christians for Excellence in Education, American Family Association, and Traditional Values Coalition.<sup>156</sup>

Off the Education Message:

Like the AFT and NEA, the PTA also takes positions on and devotes resources to many non-education topics. Some are calls for adequate housing for every family and environmental programs devoted to air pollution. Another is a proposal to make the District of Columbia a state with representation in Congress. They also call for the United States to officially sign United Nations' treaties undermining the family as a societal foundation.<sup>157</sup> Finally, PTA leaders and activists continue to lobby for a vast array of social programs and legislation, including a ban on certain firearms, television program ratings, tobacco regulations, child nutrition programs, and federal job training programs.

### Political Agenda

The PTA Lobby:

From its inception, PTA leaders emphasized the organization must concern itself with the legislative process. Accordingly, to further its agenda the PTA lobbies extensively in state and national legislatures. With its unified tri-level organizational status, National PTA leaders strongly urge all affiliates to support the national lobbying agenda, which includes the aforementioned slate of causes.<sup>158</sup> To ensure uniformity, PTA officials stifle open discussion of controversial issues and discourage parents from questioning the PTA's official positions. At its convention, a California PTA official reminded delegates that "We will pull the [PTA] charter if any unit goes beyond the PTA agendas we would have with any PTA that supported vouchers!"<sup>159</sup>

In 1999 alone, the National PTA's full-time lobbying staff (not including the more than 50 headquarters' staff) spent close to \$335,000 on lobbying.<sup>160</sup> Included in this expenditure is the PTA's newsletter "What's Happening in Washington," now part of its magazine *Our Children*, and posted on the group's website.<sup>161</sup> All of these keep members informed of action alerts regarding pending legislation, federal social welfare and education legislation, and lobbying. In addition, the PTA uses these resources to encourage member action. The National PTA's "services, materials and resources enable each PTA in the network and the millions of individuals to be more effective."<sup>162</sup> However, the reality is that PTA-in-the-know activists and leaders are aware of the PTA's legislative agenda, but rank and file members remain ignorant of this aspect of PTA membership.

To encourage political effectiveness, the PTA trains members in local and state affiliates to lobby. At its annual convention, the PTA offers workshops entitled: "Effective Advocacy Techniques," "Effective Schools: The Federal Role," and "Parents Talking Advocacy." In these training sessions, the National PTA urges its members to push the PTA's social agenda at all levels of government and oppose school choice and other school reforms.

The PTA's lobbying effectiveness also grows out of its political spending. At its 2000 convention, PTA leaders urged delegates to raise annual dues in order to enhance the group's lobbying efforts. "With this increase, PTA can be everywhere you would like to be," promised PTA leaders.<sup>163</sup> Delegates eventually settled on a 25 percent increase, which added more than \$1.5 million to the National PTA budget in 2001-02.

Through such initiatives and resources, the PTA has enjoyed success in its lobbying efforts, including supporting increased federal spending on education and opposing legislation that would have allowed individuals to claim a tuition tax credit of one-half of private elementary, secondary, or college tuition paid, up to a maximum of \$500. (This led to the PTA's adoption of its strong and consistent anti-school voucher and tuition tax credit position.<sup>164</sup>)

The PTA also supported the establishment of the U.S. Department of Education's Goals 2000. This legislation set vague Outcome Based Education (OBE) goals based on attitudes, promoted "one-stop shopping" health care at schools, and destructively intruded on pre-school parenting<sup>165</sup> (signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1994).

#### Campaign Politics:

Despite its bylaw requirement to be nonpartisan, the PTA has used its convention platform to support the Democratic party. Hillary Clinton, Tipper Gore, former Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala all stressed their partisan successes in addressing PTA delegates. Yet, during the same period from 1996 to 2000, no high-profile Republicans spoke at National PTA conventions.<sup>166</sup>

Moreover, at the invitation of PTA leaders to deliver a keynote address at the 1999 convention, political writer Molly Ivins ridiculed then-Texas Republican Governor George W. Bush for considering a run for the presidency. In the same year, a PTA workshop speaker, who worked as a Democrat staffer in Senator Ted Kennedy's office, soundly criticized congressional Republicans.<sup>167</sup> The staffer then repeatedly reminded PTA members that Democrats support the PTA agenda. Finally, Ginny Markell, National PTA president joined Tipper Gore and Secretary Riley on a campaign bus tour to several states in the weeks before the 2000 presidential election.

#### **IRON TRIANGLE: THE NEA-AFT-PTA ALLIANCE**

As the beliefs and values of these organizations remain largely unknown, few recognize the relationships among them. Through formal and informal coalitions and alliances, the NEA, AFT, and PTA represent nearly 10 million teachers, college professors, school staff, administrators, and parents. Today, the agendas of all three are quite similar, but that was not always so.

For many years, the NEA and AFT operated as opponents. "The two unions spent decades locked in a costly rivalry, constantly raiding each other for members and taking different positions on an array of education issues."<sup>168</sup> NEA president Bob Chase estimated "the NEA [alone] spent \$52 million from 1973 to 1992 fighting the AFT," and affiliates spent nearly \$60 million.<sup>169</sup> Much of the controversy centered around the structural and operational differences between the groups, differing opinions about educational issues, and NEA membership concerns about losing autonomy to the AFL-CIO.

However, that did not stop NEA and AFT leaders from discussing a merger, which they have been doing for more than a decade.<sup>170</sup> The idea gained great momentum in the late 1990s among union leaders as they sought to combat growing conservative gains in educational policy. In addition, their priorities and policies grew to be nearly comparable. Union feuding, for the most part, subsided.<sup>171</sup>

Yet, a merger between the two groups continued to be a contentious issue. In 1998, NEA delegates to the annual convention soundly rejected merger plans, promoted by union leaders, "that would have created the largest teachers union and a powerful force within organized labor."<sup>172</sup> Leaders from both unions called the

merger a "momentous opportunity to expand influence in schools and statehouses"<sup>173</sup> and touted it as a way to "strengthen both unions as they battle 'extremist' groups trying to 'dismantle public schools and silence unions."<sup>174</sup> For Chase, the 1998 rejection was disappointing, as he had "put the weight of the union leadership behind the merger."<sup>175</sup> Likewise, AFT president Sandra Feldman called the vote "obviously disappointing," but both vowed to continue campaigning for a merger.<sup>176</sup>

Despite the NEA rejection, partnerships between the groups continued. In 1997, a 30-member NEA-AFT Joint Council formed to better represent the interests of both unions, including lobbying and joint statements.<sup>177</sup> For example, in 2001, Feldman and Chase joined Kevin Jennings of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in representing their respective organizations in a letter to U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige.<sup>178</sup> The letter called for Paige to put the weight of the Department of Education behind the causes of gays and lesbians. Moreover, incremental steps toward merger were already underway. By the late 1990s, 18 locals had merged, and a few state affiliates (Minnesota, Montana, and Florida) were doing so. In 2001, NEA members and AFT leaders agreed to a partnership designed to lead to an eventual merger.<sup>179</sup> Feldman responded, "We're very pleased that the AFT and the NEA now will have a more formal partnership that allows us to focus together on goals that we share."<sup>180</sup>

The relationship between the PTA and the teachers' unions, particularly the NEA, began much earlier than the AFTNEA alliance and was far more amenable. The PTA began its association with the NEA in the early 1900s. As membership in both organizations grew rapidly, both required staff and national offices. In its mansion-headquarters a short distance from the White House, the NEA provided space for the PTA's national office for decades until 1939, when the PTA moved its headquarters to Chicago.<sup>181</sup> In 1977, when the PTA opened its government relations office, it again operated out of the NEA building until moving out in the mid-1990s when the NEA renovated its headquarters.<sup>182</sup>

The PTA expanded its association with teachers' unions through various coalitions, one of which is the Forum of Educational Organization Leaders. Now renamed the Learning First Alliance, NEA's Executive Director Don Cameron said of the Alliance, "[O]ur job is to continue advocating for our members."<sup>183</sup> In other words, the Learning First Alliance promotes the interests of the teachers' unions instead of devoting itself to student achievement, as the name implies. That mission remained the same when the PTA president assumed the chairmanship of the Alliance in 1998.

As a loyal member of the Alliance, the PTA supports teacher unionism while "oppos[ing] vouchers and tax subsidies" for parents whose children attend religious schools.<sup>184</sup> Moreover, the NEA, AFT, and PTA all oppose any form of school choice, home schooling, and even private scholarship programs. At the same time, all three groups support expanding government programs, protecting failing schools, and promoting the social agendas discussed above.<sup>185</sup> On the major issues on which they have taken a stand, there is no disagreement between the PTA and the unions.<sup>186</sup>

Although past PTA president and NEA member Ginny Markell asserts "[The PTA] isn't beholden to teacher unions,"<sup>187</sup> Charlotte Frass, chief Washington lobbyist for the American Federation of Teachers acknowledges, "We often lobby together."<sup>188</sup> Moreover, William F. Goodling, former chair of the U.S. House Committee on Economic and Education Opportunities observed, "I don't know why they even have 'P' in their name. They don't represent parents. They represent whatever the major education groups want, which is the status quo."<sup>189</sup> Nor was the alliance lost on its own membership. In a letter to Focus on the Family a PTA member wrote, "I was continually at odds with the state PTA because their philosophy was in line with the NEA rather than in line with what was best for students, parents and families in general."<sup>190</sup>

PTA-supported teacher unionization has also drastically altered the political landscape for school boards, parents, and the PTA. When the NEA expanded its collective bargaining power, NEA-member teachers threatened to withdraw their PTA membership and boycott local PTAs if the PTA supported local school boards instead of the unionized teachers.<sup>191</sup> The PTA's decision to support the teacher unions represented a major strategic victory for the NEA and AFT. Many issues formerly resolved unilaterally by local school boards, such as class assignments for teachers, salary, benefits, and teacher evaluations, are now resolved by collective bargaining with teacher unions.

For parents, this exclusion from negotiations and such decisions means parents have lost their institutional voice. At one time, school boards acted as the parents' voice on issues such as teacher evaluations and tenure. However, when the PTA supported union collective bargaining power, parents were excluded from significant decision making.<sup>192</sup>

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

All three of these organizations hold political and social views typically called liberal or leftist, but there is, of course, nothing inherently wrong in holding a viewpoint. Each is a private, non-governmental entity free to believe what it will and ally with whom it chooses. Their private status, however, belies the public consequences of their beliefs and actions. Through their membership, these three organizations together represent the majority of those working in or associated with public schools. Thus, while they may be private in the eyes of the IRS, the vehicles and arenas for their values are decidedly public.

As lobbying and political organizations, few groups rival the influence of each individually and as a coalition. With the NEA, AFT, and PTA's political spending, support for political candidates, coalitions with ideological allies outside of education, and intense lobbying, those who served in or currently serve in Washington, DC do not exaggerate when calling them the most powerful forces in education. Thus, through their influence, these private groups affect significant public change.

However, their influence is not limited to national arenas. Through local union representation and a corner on the market of classroom presence, the NEA and AFT, in particular, are able to influence decisions in local schools. Historically, union influence was generally limited to collective bargaining issues salary, benefits, working conditions, etc. Yet, schools are now beginning to include local unions in decision-making traditionally reserved for elected school board members or school administrators.<sup>193</sup>

Finally, this article began by highlighting the phenomenon that most people know little to nothing about these organizations' beliefs. Others have heard something but may wonder if it is accurate. The importance of knowing the values of these groups cannot be underestimated. Teachers and parents often join and support the NEA, AFT, or PTA without knowing what the organizations believe and seek to accomplish. For those who identify with agendas associated with those on the left, membership would be natural. For those opposed to such values, voluntary membership may and would likely prove problematic. However, knowing what the organizations believe is the important first step to refusing membership, seeking alternative organizations, or diverting mandatory dues to a chosen charity.

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