

Emerging Leaders Conference  
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I was President of Vermont-NEA from 1981 to 1989. I'm old, in terms of my Medicare card, and in terms of my experience as a labor leader, and in terms of the over 40 years I was a teacher in Vermont. Last year, I opened my remarks at the Emerging Leaders Conference by half-jokingly referring to myself as having come out of Jurassic Park for the occasion.

This year, there is no element of joking about it. I feel very much the dinosaur.

In the past year, I have witnessed two locals voting to accept imposition of personnel policies instead of fighting with every means available for a contract. One was my own local. I saw this painful decision characterized as "taking the high road," instead of what it was: "Adjusting the strategy, but not the mission"... in this instance, the "mission" of attaining a contract.

I saw a curious absence of language to counter-balance the implication that voting to strike would have been "the low road," the implication that the hundreds of Vermont teachers who have voted to strike over the years were somehow "less professional," "less committed to their students," "less respectful of their communities."

Concurrently, this past summer I could still find, quite easily, even for a technophobe such as myself, the list of Vermont teacher strikes on the Vermont-NEA web site. Two weeks ago I gave up after trying a variety of approaches. I could easily locate lots and lots of Association instruction and professional development material. However, even the most superficial representation of Vermont-NEA's labor history was absent... unless I went to the Member Center, which interestingly has limited access. And even then, I still could not find the list of our strikes. And if it's there, somewhere, I suggest that it shouldn't be so hard to find.

It's great that the Vermont-NEA calendar states that we are the Union of Vermont Educators... as does the sign in front of this hall. But it seems to me that we may still be uncomfortable with the fact that we are a union... granted, a union of education personnel, but a union nonetheless. It is the same identity crisis we have faced ever since the teacher collective bargaining law was passed in 1969. It is the same identity crisis which surfaced in a different way, shamefully, when we began to organize support personnel in the 80's... this idea that somehow teachers are a "cut above," a "breed apart."

Don't get me wrong. I am not a lover of controversy for the sake of controversy. I do not advocate, and never have advocated, rattling the saber or throwing our weight around to no good purpose. But there is the matter of integrity, of holding true to the "mission." There is the matter of spine, combined with intellect. There is the matter of moral compass... being honest about, and open about, and true to who we are and what we are.

Somewhere in the middle of my eight years as President of Vermont-NEA, a couple of very dear friends told me that it was time for me to exit the scene, that I was doing harm to the "mission," that friends of theirs in the Legislature had complained that I was making people uncomfortable. I remember thinking: "Isn't that part of my job?"

Darned few people had been doing us any favors. We had begun the 80's with experienced teachers making so little money that they and their families were on food stamps. We had begun the 80's as 51st in the nation in terms of average teacher salary. In spite of our first four teacher strikes having taken place at the end of the

70's, the 80's were when we got "uppity," when virtually non-stop, we pushed the envelope at the bargaining table, in the Legislature, in the media.

The 80's were marked by the march in Burlington... 27 locals giving public voice to the fact that 51st in teacher salaries was not good for the profession or for our students, the painful and profound truth being that Vermont was not positioned to attract or to retain the best and the brightest as teachers.

The 80's were marked by the "Up from 51st" plan. Its lynchpin was a legislative proposal for enough State Aid to fund what we called

20/35: \$20,000 for a beginning teacher and \$35,000 for a teacher with a Master's and ten years experience. It cost \$113 million.

"Preposterous," said the media and the general public; "Preposterous," said legislators; "Preposterous," said voices from within our own ranks.

I guess there were indeed a lot of uncomfortable people. Even so, there were also those who may have been uncomfortable but who equally were willing to fight the fight, to pursue the "mission," and it is important for you to understand the strength of those shoulders you stand on today. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of educators bussed in from every corner of the state for a second march, the march on the State House.

Unheard of behavior... from educators, no less...

joined by the then little known but gutsy lead sponsor of the legislation -- Howard Dean. That year did not see the sought-after increase of State Aid, but we were shaping the environment. It was in two years that we saw the increase, not to \$113 million, but to \$127 million. Not bad, despite people being "uncomfortable."

But we were far from "done." The 80's were then marked by the "Agenda for Change." It was here that we shifted the "mission" from 20/35 to an average teacher salary of \$48,000. It was with the "Agenda for Change" that we proposed five years of preparation, not four, for teaching. It was with the Agenda for Change that we introduced legislation to establish a teacher-majority licensing and standards board... given that opportunity by the venerable and gutsy lead sponsor -- Phil Hoff. "Preposterous," said the media and the general public; "Preposterous," said legislators. "Uncomfortable?" I guess so. By then, we were giving people hives... only figuratively speaking... I think. But by this time, it was darned few voices from within our own ranks that said, "Preposterous." Nonetheless, once again, the "mission" was not immediately fulfilled. The teacher-majority licensing board, for instance, was not attained until the 21st Century, nor was the average teacher salary of \$48,000. But attained they were, thanks to integrity and courage and attentiveness to day-to-day drudgery. The "compass" was unswerving.

But back to the 80's where that work began. Throughout, we clearly had a persistent and consistent public "presence." So what was going on internal to the Association? Throughout, regional bargaining became much more potent, much less loosey-goosey. Throughout, we had training and lots of it for local leaders; pep talks and lots of them for rank-and-file membership; legislative dinners in every county, every year; membership lobbying days at the State House during February Break, for years. We also had many "think-tank" meetings with local leaders and the membership across the state -- where do you think the "Agenda for Change" came from? And yes, the 80's were marked by eight more strikes, ranging from one day to eighty-seven days in length... to be followed, you should know, by eleven more throughout the 90's and into this century.

But again, back to the 80's. Bottom line, internal to the Association, the 80's were marked by "getting our act together,"

interweaving success at the bargaining table with political and legislative action, PR both internally and externally, and still with all that, attention to instruction and professional development issues.

Today, we're not 51st any more and we haven't been near that for many,

many years. Today, the levels of state support for education which were once considered “preposterous” are laughable in comparison, not even “pin money.” Today, “teacher empowerment” is as ingrained a concept as the sun coming up in the morning.

Today.... Today, this lunacy about the retirement system is facing us. Today, school boards, at least two and that’s two more than before, apparently think that imposition is no big deal and is preferable to coming to an agreement with their employees. Today, the economy has been in the tank for months on end and, some say, “we should all be thankful even to have a job.” Yes, today is as uncomfortable as it was waking up to find that we were 51st in the nation... and the day-to-day reality that that represented.

I think it’s time for another pro-active, multi-faceted state-wide “agenda,” with every aspect of Association work interwoven and with the rank-and-file membership integral to its creation, and to its implementation, and thus to its success. It cannot be piece-meal or hit-or-miss. It cannot rely on only a few individuals. It must be carefully planned and carefully crafted in its substance and in its execution. And it needs to be “known” -- not only by the state and local Association leaders, not only by the Association membership, but also by the general public, over and over again.

Preposterous? I don’t think so. Last year, I spoke of fortune favoring the audacious. The idea comes from Erasmus. The experience of the 80’s gives me the right to press the idea: Embark on what may seem a quixotic venture, and should you do so not only with spine but also with intellect and heart, you will be inspired and energized. You will forge a relationship with your members that will not fade. You will have made a difference, together.

A word of caution to you as leaders. Remember that it's the venture, it's the “mission” that matters. It's not about “you,” just as it was not about “me” in the 80's. It's about doing what's right for the Association. It's about doing what's right for the profession. It's about doing what's right for students. It's about understanding, believing that the Association and the profession and the students are inextricably linked. It is reflective of the fact that we are both a professional organization and a union. There is no contradiction there. We had to come to terms with that back in the 80's. We have to come to terms with it today... really and finally come to terms with it.

I represent the past. I am an incorrigible and unrepentant dinosaur, and proud of it. You are the ones who matter today, you and your members. Today, the responsibility for pursuing the “mission” rests on your shoulders. Just remember that you stand on the solid foundation of those who went before you. Learn from them. Engage your spine, your intellect, and your heart. Then act... relentlessly, painstakingly, consistently.

Fortune does indeed favor the audacious.