



## Support the Students, Not the Unions

As states, municipalities, and families continue to struggle to balance their budgets, the political influence of public-sector unions has received more scrutiny. In Nebraska, fire and police unions have been under an especially close microscope, while the state teacher's union has, so far, escaped detailed examination.

The Nebraska State Educators Association (NSEA)-the teacher's union-is one of the biggest players in Nebraska politics. More than 85 percent of Nebraska teachers belong to either the state union or a local affiliate, constituting the 19<sup>th</sup> highest unionization rate in the country.[\[1\]](#) The NSEA specifically has roughly 28,000 members and brings in \$467 per teacher every year.[\[2\]](#)

Nebraska's teachers unions have a significant impact on state policy and are heavily involved in the political process. In a ranking of teachers unions by state, Nebraska's unions are the 26<sup>th</sup> most powerful overall, beating out those in neighboring states.[\[3\]](#) But for political involvement, however, Nebraska's unions are 13<sup>th</sup>, contributing the 5<sup>th</sup> highest for contributions to state candidates over the past decade, and the 8<sup>th</sup> highest for donations to political parties. Last year's Platte Institute study on campaign finance in state elections from 2006-2010 revealed the NSEA's Political Action Committee (PAC) spent more on "negative independent expenditures" than any other single PAC, and provided the majority of funding for the political activities of Nebraskans for Responsible Government, a labor-affiliated PAC.[\[4\]](#) Nebraska Accountability and Disclosure Commission (NADC) reports have a total of nearly \$170,000 in NSEA contributions to specific members of the State Board of Education and to all but one member of the Legislature's Education Committee in the most recent elections.[\[5\]](#)

This political activism has paid off for the NSEA, with 59.6 percent of education dollars from local, state, and federal sources go to teacher salaries and benefits; only New York has a higher allotment.[\[6\]](#) Such benefits include a defined benefit pension system that promises an overly optimistic eight percent rate of return on investments. When the predicted return is not made-and several investment firms predict returns to only be around 5.6-6.1 percent over the long term[\[7\]](#)-state taxpayers are left on the hook. The union's power can even be seen when despite a desperate need to reform public pensions this year, the Legislature only passed an NSEA-supported short-term fix which does nothing to address the long-term structural problems, and even overrode Governor Heineman's veto to do so.[\[8\]](#) At the same time, union supported raises in teacher pay across numerous local districts outpaced inflation between 1999 and 2009. The average Nebraska teacher salary of \$47,368 is the 34<sup>th</sup> highest in the nation, but when adjusted for cost of living it rises to 28<sup>th</sup>.[\[9\]](#) To put that in perspective relative to Nebraska students, the Science and Engineering Readiness Index ranked Nebraska 43<sup>rd</sup> in preparing students in math, science, and

engineering with a 1.97 score on a 1-5 scale in 2012.[\[10\]](#)

Unions have also been major players in the policy process on education and tax issues. The NSEA was a key member in the coalition opposing the tax reforms introduced by the Governor in both 2012 and 2013.[\[11\]](#) They were also staunch opponents of Sen. Scott Lautenbaugh's bill to allow charter schools in Omaha. Since the bill was killed in committee, Nebraska remains one of only eight states that still do not allow charter schools.[\[12\]](#) Similarly, the union has consistently and effectively opposed other school choice legislation such as vouchers or tax credit scholarships that would empower low-income children to choose better schools than what might be otherwise be available. Efforts to pass tax credit scholarship legislation failed in both 2011 and 2013.[\[13\]](#)

The dead-on-arrival nature of any educational choice legislation opposed by the NSEA demonstrates how their political activity positions their lobbyists to obstruct needed educational reforms. A recent study from the American Action Forum made the claim that collective bargaining in general has been an impediment to student achievement, noting that students in right to work states tended to out-perform their counterparts in states where collective bargaining is mandatory. For example, students in the heavily unionized cities of Chicago and New York saw half of their 4<sup>th</sup> graders below national math standards in 2011, and one-third of 4<sup>th</sup> graders in those cities were also below reading standards. Conversely, Charlotte and Austin, in right-to-work states of North Carolina and Texas, respectively, had a majority of 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders exceeding national standards in both math and reading.

The strong influence of the teachers union on Nebraska educational policy cannot be understated. Unions can provide valuable services to their members, but their activities now go far beyond simple job protection for their members and have prevented Nebraska from enacting reforms that would benefit under-served student populations. It is time for Nebraska's policymakers to prioritize parents and students above lobbyists for Nebraska's politically active teachers union.

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[\[1\]](#) Amber M. Winkler, Janie Scull, Dara Zeehandelaar, "How Strong Are U.S. Teacher Unions? A State-By-State Comparison: Nebraska," Thomas Fordham Institute, October 29, 2012. Accessed July 16, 2013, <http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2012/20121029-How-Strong-Are-US-Teacher-Unions/20121029-Union-Strength-Nebraska.pdf>.

[2] Nebraska State Education, "About Us." Accessed July 16, 2012, <http://www.nsea.org/about-us>; Amber M. Winkler, Janie Scull, Dara Zeehandelaar, "How Strong Are U.S. Teacher Unions? A State-By-State Comparison: Nebraska," Thomas Fordham Institute, October 29, 2012. Accessed July 16, 2013, <http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2012/20121029-How-Strong-Are-US-Teacher-Unions/20121029-Union-Strength-Nebraska.pdf>.

[3] Amber M. Winkler, Janie Scull, Dara Zeehandelaar, "How Strong Are U.S. Teacher Unions? A State-By-State Comparison," Thomas Fordham Institute, October 29, 2012. Accessed July 18, 2013, <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/how-strong-are-us-teacher-unions.html>. The rankings of the other states are as follows:

Iowa: 27

Wyoming: 29

Kansas: 32

South Dakota: 34

Colorado: 35

Missouri: 38

[4] Amber M. Winkler, Janie Scull, Dara Zeehandelaar, "How Strong Are U.S. Teacher Unions? A State-By-State Comparison: Nebraska," Thomas Fordham Institute, October 29, 2012. Accessed July 16, 2013, <http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2012/20121029-How-Strong-Are-US-Teacher-Unions/20121029-Union-Strength-Nebraska.pdf>; Platte Institute, "Capitol Gains: A Review of Money in Campaigns for the Nebraska Legislature in the Term Limits Era," October 2012. Accessed July 18, 2013, [http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20121024\\_my\\_Campaign\\_Finance\\_report.pdf](http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20121024_my_Campaign_Finance_report.pdf).

[5] The disclosure reports for the State Board and Education Committee members can be found on the Nebraska Accountability and Disclosure Commission. Most are from the 2012 election and include "in-kind" contributions.

State Board of Education:

Lillie Larsen: Total NSEA contributions: \$7,500

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=12CAC01630&OFFREC=01/02/2013&REPORT\\_ID=15383](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=12CAC01630&OFFREC=01/02/2013&REPORT_ID=15383)

Rachel Wise: Total NSEA contributions: \$34,988.50

<http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=12CAC01686&OFFREC=01/16/2013>

[&REPORT\\_ID=15764](#)

Rebecca Valdez: Total NSEA contributions: \$2,500

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=08CAC01181&OFFREC=11/27/2012  
&REPORT\\_ID=15161](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=08CAC01181&OFFREC=11/27/2012&REPORT_ID=15161)

Legislature's Education Committee:

Kate Sullivan (Chair): Total NSEA Contributions: \$2,500

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=08CAC01069&OFFREC=01/07/2013  
&REPORT\\_ID=15507](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=08CAC01069&OFFREC=01/07/2013&REPORT_ID=15507)

Bill Avery: Total NSEA Contributions: \$7,500

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=05CAC00726&OFFREC=01/11/2011  
&REPORT\\_ID=8861](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=05CAC00726&OFFREC=01/11/2011&REPORT_ID=8861)

Tanya Cook: Total NSEA Contributions: \$16,155

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=07CAC01061&OFFREC=01/15/2013  
&REPORT\\_ID=15706](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=07CAC01061&OFFREC=01/15/2013&REPORT_ID=15706)

Al Davis: Total NSEA Contributions: \$15,823.78

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=12CAC01650&OFFREC=01/15/2013  
&REPORT\\_ID=15692](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=12CAC01650&OFFREC=01/15/2013&REPORT_ID=15692)

Ken Haar: Total NSEA Contributions: \$31,716.29

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=08CAC01089&OFFREC=01/15/2013  
&REPORT\\_ID=15717](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=08CAC01089&OFFREC=01/15/2013&REPORT_ID=15717)

Rich Kolowski: Total NSEA Contributions: \$46,433.50

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=11CAC01603&OFFREC=01/15/2013  
&REPORT\\_ID=15710](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=11CAC01603&OFFREC=01/15/2013&REPORT_ID=15710)

Jim Scheer: Total NSEA Contributions: \$2,500

[http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=12CAC01641&OFFREC=01/11/2013  
&REPORT\\_ID=15621](http://nadc.nol.org/ccdb/search.cgi?page=formb1b&IDNO=12CAC01641&OFFREC=01/11/2013&REPORT_ID=15621)

[6] Amber M. Winkler, Janie Scull, Dara Zeelandelaar, "How Strong Are U.S. Teacher Unions? A State-By-State Comparison: Nebraska," Thomas Fordham Institute, October 29, 2012. Accessed July 16, 2013, <http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2012/20121029-How-Strong-Are-US-Teacher-Unions/20121029-Union-Strength-Nebraska.pdf>.

[7] Andrew G. Biggs, "Honest Accounting and Public Employee Pensions in Nebraska," Platte

Institute for Economic Research, May 2013. Accessed July 18, 2013, [http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20130520\\_Platte-Pension\\_\(3\).pdf](http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20130520_Platte-Pension_(3).pdf).

[8] JoAnne Young, "Lawmakers override teacher retirement veto," *Lincoln Journal Star*, May 14, 2013. Accessed July 18, 2013, [http://journalstar.com/legislature/lawmakers-override-teacher-retirement-veto/article\\_4db4674d-0201-512d-8d58-e2d9e607dfde.html](http://journalstar.com/legislature/lawmakers-override-teacher-retirement-veto/article_4db4674d-0201-512d-8d58-e2d9e607dfde.html).

[9] Paul Goodsell, "Teacher Pay Outpacing Inflation," *Omaha World Herald*, October 25, 2009. Accessed July 19, 2013, <http://www.omaha.com/article/20091025/NEWS01/710259891>. Teacher Portal, "Teacher Salaries by State," National Education Association. Accessed July 19, 2013, <http://www.teacherportal.com/teacher-salaries-by-state/>.

[10] Huffington Post, "State Education Rankings: The Best And Worst For Math And Science," *Huffington Post*, October 1, 2012. Accessed July 19, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/11/state-education-rankings-\\_n\\_894528.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/11/state-education-rankings-_n_894528.html).

[11] Martha Stoddard, "Coalition opposes tax-cut plan," *Omaha World Herald* February 14, 2012. Accessed July 18, 2013, <http://www.omaha.com/article/20120214/NEWS01/702159995>; Martha Stoddard, "Gov. Heineman has few allies on tax plan," *Omaha World Herald*, February 7, 2012. Accessed July 18, 2013, <http://www.omaha.com/article/20130207/NEWS/702079885>.

[12] Associated Press, "Nebraska Lawmakers Debate Charter-Schools Bill," *WOWT*, May 7, 2013. Accessed July 18, 2013, <http://www.wowt.com/home/headlines/Nebraska-Lawmakers-Debate-Charter-Schools-Bill-206474721.html>; Center for Education Reform, "The Last Eight States Without Charter Laws." Accessed July 18, 2013, <http://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/CharterLaws2013-Last-8-States.pdf>.

[13] The bills in those years were LB50 in 2011 and LB14 in 2013. Nebraska Legislature, "LB50," Introduced January 6, 2011. Accessed July 19, 2013, [http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/bills/view\\_bill.php?DocumentID=11897](http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/bills/view_bill.php?DocumentID=11897); Nebraska Legislature, "LB14," Introduced January 10, 2013. Accessed July 19, 2013, [http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/bills/view\\_bill.php?DocumentID=17975](http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/bills/view_bill.php?DocumentID=17975).

