

Testimony of Courtney Johnson
On behalf of the National Education Association
Hearing on State Fights in Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin
March 8, 2011

The American way has always been one that includes a great deal of free spirit, enterprise and independence. And it has also included an aspect of compassion that few nations in history can rival.

Out of this compassion arose a public education system that attempts to do what no other has done before: provide an equitable education to every single member of society, without regard to race, gender, wealth, social status, or perceived lack of intelligence or ability. A system that has proven to be a great equalizer for millions as they strive to gain a level playing field in the game of life and in the pursuit of the jobs of tomorrow.

Even as a little girl in Ironton, Ohio, I knew my mother had this compassion—she cared about making an impact, and contributing to, bettering our little town – first as a social worker, then a teacher’s aide, and finally as a teacher. Years later, when I followed her example and became a teacher, I realized my mother served something much greater than our little town. My mother, my first teacher, was, and is, a teacher. I still say those words with pride: My mother is a teacher; I am teacher. To be a teacher was a position of honor. Unfortunately, this perception no longer seems to be the case.

My friend Justin Nawman said recently, “aside from family and friends there will be no one who cares more about your child’s well being and future than a teacher...that I can promise you.” Collective bargaining lets your child’s teacher fight for them. We fight for smaller class sizes. We fight for professional development. We fight for art classes, physical education classes, and music classes. We fight for school nurses, and school social workers, and occupational therapists, and school libraries. We fight to be able to teach, not to teach to a test. We fight for technology that works. We fight to prepare your children for college and the world of work.

A new conversation is taking place all over the nation, and I fear for the New America we may soon become. Amid the growing battles we face to fund our schools the way they once were, I fear that we will be unable to preserve the equal opportunity, I fear that we will be unable to preserve the compassion that is America.

Well over a century ago, Mark Twain wrote some of the most astute and timeless observations of our society ever written. Amongst these he noted that he was living in what he referred to as a “Gilded Age” of America. One in which very few had a great deal, while the vast majority had very little.

The advent and strengthening of our public schools had a great effect on improving this disparity. However, we near a new gilded age, and now, in states like Ohio and Wisconsin we are on the verge of dismantling our public schools through unprecedented cuts in funding and the elimination of teachers’ rights.

This puts us at a crossroads:

Do we want the dubious distinction of being the first generation to hand off a lesser America than the one we inherited? Do we truly want to leave our kids a world absent many of the opportunities we were afforded through a quality public education?

Have we lost that great compassion that made us an anomaly amongst nations? Have we lost all desire to look after one another, especially those who have such a small voice in this conversation: our kids?

Ever deepening cuts to our public schools sends the dual messages to our kids that: One, it is not a priority that they get educated; and two, that we have given up on finding better solutions to our problems. Many of us are not willing to send that message, and I know that we are not alone. Just watch the news and you will see Americans are not ready to give up on our kids.

Undermining collective bargaining does not create jobs or reduce deficits. It hurts our students. The simple fact is that teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions. We need to have a voice at the table so that we can speak up for what we know our students need. We need a voice in decisions about school facilities and class size. We have to be heard about the textbooks, materials, and technology our students are using and whether they are adequate to prepare them for the 21st century. And, we must be in the discussions about how to ensure our students' safety and the safety of everyone in the school environment. If we are not at the table, our first-hand, real-world experience is not at the table, and our students are the ones who will lose.

Amongst the public school educators and policemen and firemen I stand in solidarity with today in my red for ed dress, everyone is scrambling to come up with ways in which we can continue to do more with less. But, not surprisingly, the concerns I hear are not about salary and benefits:

A bright, recent graduate wonders if she should not become a teacher.

A beloved, veteran guidance counselor wonders if she should just get out now.

A talented student musician wonders if she will be able to make music with her peers during a hectic school day.

A friend of mind, now a professor at The Ohio State University, was fired from a non-union position in education because she was *protecting, and advocating for, the rights of her students!* Students like Thomas Wayne Marlow – a developmentally disabled fifth grade drop-out who came up to me and handed me this card after my speech at the Ohio Statehouse rally last Tuesday and asked for MY help. He wants to get his GED.

I teach a ninth grade humanities class – in my class music, art, history, and literature become one. The other day we were studying protest songs in connection with *Animal Farm*. We listened to John Lennon and Billie Holiday and Bob Marley and Neil Young. When the bell rang at the end of class, one of my students turned around and said, "I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE." Finally, education made sense to her.

So I wonder, without my voice at the bargaining table, if merit pay, in its current implementation, will usher in an extreme form of teaching to the test—because the mortgage may depend on it! I wonder if we will stop the lesson, and return to "testable outcomes." I guarantee you my students will pass the test every year, but they won't know anything. They won't want to stay *even* after the bell rings.

It's called drill-and-kill for a reason; it kills creative thinking. Our global economy requires creative thinking, our global economy requires citizens of the world.

We are the middle class, the public sector and the private sector together, are the middle class. We cannot allow the governors of Wisconsin and Ohio and Indiana and New Jersey and Pennsylvania and Florida to shift the blame to the workers in an effort to put an end to collective bargaining. The reality is that the state is to blame, not the hard-working employees – we have to remain part of the conversation.