

State Council Speech
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June 9, 2012

Good Morning, Council!

It's hard to believe I'm rounding the corner on my first year as CTA President, and wow, what a year it has been!

For this school counselor and kindergarten teacher, it's been a growth opportunity.

From visiting schools in parts of the state I've never been to before, to standing up to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, to working with our governor in developing a funding initiative that can help get our state back on track – let me tell you, it's been a wild ride.

But the very best part of being CTA President, the reason that makes me want to get up every day, is that I am surrounded by the most optimistic, the most creative, the most intelligent and the most ingenious people I know ... and that is you.

People, that's you.

I'm lucky because I get to spend time with people who inspire me.

People who believe they are making a difference.

People who care.

People who are not afraid to stand up for what is right for their profession and for the students they serve.

Who would not want to spend time with people like that, right?

I can tell you, it's rare that I leave a site visit or a meeting with our members that I don't feel uplifted with a renewed sense of purpose.

Manzanar

It was with that sense of purpose that I spent the Memorial Day weekend with the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus a few weeks ago.

We went to Manzanar on the Eastern Side of the Sierra.

Manzanar, as you may know, was one of 10 internment camps for the 120,000 Japanese American citizens who were rounded up on the West Coast during World War II.

Manzanar from my point of view, was a concentration camp.

But until you see how remote and isolated and arid and dusty it is, it is hard to imagine it was home to 10,000 people who were held there against their will for several years.

It was a deeply moving experience for me, especially thinking about the hundreds of children who were relocated and educated there, despite a shortage of paper, space and teachers.

We now know what an injustice and a national shame that program was.

But after my visit and actually seeing it, I came away so proud that CTA was among a handful of groups at that time to condemn the action as blatantly disregarding the civil liberties of Japanese Americans ... American Citizens.

CTA stood strong, and spoke the truth.

The truth ... that is the stuff of which this organization is made.

And that is the stuff that is going to carry us through these difficult times and carry us to victory in November.

Rebecca Mieliwocki

The last time we were here together, we heard from the California Teachers of the Year, including Rebecca Mieliwocki, who has since been named National Teacher of the Year.

I attended the White House ceremony where she was honored by President Obama.

And let me tell you, the President wasn't the superstar that day.

I wasn't the superstar that day, nor was NEA President Dennis von Roedel.

The superstar was a seventh-grade English teacher from Burbank California.

And just as she blew us away at State Council in March, she rocked the White House as well.

Rebecca gets it.

She knows her work is important and she doesn't hesitate to let folks know.

One of the things she said was:

"Every day, here in America, teachers with patience and creativity are opening doors for children to reach deep within themselves to learn more, solve problems, grow, and nurture their dreams.

That we do this work with conviction is not unusual.

It isn't even rare.

It happens in America's classrooms every day, and I need you to know that.”

My friends, that is the message we must take across this state.

Telling Our Stories

This year, in our *Educator* Magazine and on our website, we've been publishing letters from grateful students.

These have been special notes our members have held on to, and they were not just to teachers, but to librarians, college counselors, and school secretaries and paraprofessionals.

Believe me, I was surprised myself to receive an email from one of my students going back to when I taught at Orchard Elementary School in Vacaville.

Her name was Rachel, and being a kindergartener, the things she remembers about me is: me playing the guitar, singing songs during circle time, and, when I was *really* strict, making a kid remove his shoes in

class because he was playing with the Velcro on them.

Who knew that Rachel would grow up to be a teacher at Cupertino High School ... or that she couldn't imagine being anything else but an educator.

I can't tell you how moving it was for me to receive that note.

You know, you feel it too when you get that note.

That's why I want to encourage you to tell your own stories.

They are so powerful.

Let people know about students you've had in the classroom.

Your successes, your challenges, those teaching moments, the times when you think you've made a difference and those times when you absolutely know it.

We don't tell enough of these stories, and they are so powerful in talking about who we are and the public education system we value.

Look, we have a great Governmental Relations department that advocates for us and leads campaign efforts.

We have a Communications Department that works with the media to get our message out.

We have a Community Outreach Department to make connections with families and community organizations.

We have a field department that works with us in our local chapters.

But the best advocates for our profession are you!

You are the voice and the face of CTA.

You are CTA.

You are the local teachers union.

And your story tells how we are the real leaders of education reform.

You have been living it and doing it for years.

Look, here's what you can do:

Write a letter to your local newspaper or a column about some of those students.

Send a note to a reporter about a student success story.

Use social media.

Let your Facebook friends know.

Talk to parishioners in your churches, or to members of your book clubs.

We all belong to organizations outside of CTA.

Ask to be on that agenda to talk about what's happening in your classroom.

I say this because the public deserves to know about what is going on in our schools from the people who are doing the work in our schools.

They need to know the big stuff – about the \$20 billion in budget cuts over the past four years, and the layoffs that are occurring, and class size increases, and how music and art and P.E. have been eliminated.

The list goes on and on.

They need to know because, let's face it, it's ugly out there.

There are critics who are out to blame CTA and unions for everything they don't like about public schools.

When pressed, they say, "We love teachers.

We just don't like their unions."

That's their talking point, and it's straight out of Michelle Rhee's playbook.

Well ... let's show them there is no difference between teachers and their unions.

We teach because we care about kids.

We joined the union because we care about kids and our families.

We care about the future of this country and the role public education plays in giving every child the opportunity to be the next president or the next teacher of the year.

And let's show them there is no difference between teachers and their unions when they try to silence our voice, when they challenge our collective bargaining rights or want to base teacher evaluations on a single test score.

It is up to us, to reach out to voters and tell the truth.

Campaign

I know the summer is around the corner, but we can't stop.

There is an election in November that could alter our profession like you've never seen.

You know what I'm talking about.

Whether it's the Special Exemptions Act, our new name for the Corporate Power Grab Initiative, or the Schools and Public Safety Protection Act, it's up to us to reach out to our friends, our family, our neighbors and to voters to tell them the truth.

Our main focus is to defeat the Special Exemptions Act.

This initiative would allow Super PACs and billionaire businessmen to write their own rules to have an even greater influence in politics, at the same time we would be silenced.

You may already know this, but let me refresh your memories: Corporations already outspend any effort by unions by a ratio of 15:1.

We saw this play out in Wisconsin just this week.

Union members and the middle class put up a good fight, but's let me be clear ... Scott Walker bought that election.

Thanks to the Citizens United ruling declaring corporations are individuals, the Koch brothers and other deep-pocketed Wall Street barons poured millions of dollars into his race.

They made a mockery of democracy and nearly drowned out the voices of working families.

We must stand up and speak louder here in California!

We won't have a government by and for the people as long as politicians are paid for by big corporations and the one percent.

So, we must take every opportunity to talk about this attack on our rights and the attempt to silence the voice of the middle class.

Let parents, friends and neighbors know that if they take away our ability to advocate for their students, they are taking away the chance at a better tomorrow for all of us.

Funding Initiative

The other initiative, Governor Brown's Schools and Local Public Safety Protection Act, should be a no brainer, but it is facing a tough challenge as well. When State Council voted in March to support this tax measure, you helped labor and community groups collect and turn in more than 300,000 signatures through volunteer efforts.

Incredible!

Unprecedented efforts in a short amount of time!

Thank you for getting this on the ballot.

That was you.

Now we must move on to the campaign to get this passed and put our schools ... our colleges... and California back on the road to recovery.

This initiative is a temporary tax that asks the richest Californians to pay their fair share to help fund public education and other essential services.

If the initiative fails, public education is facing an additional six billion in budget cuts next year.

Today, you will have an opportunity to go through a quick training with staff about the initiatives and what is at stake.

This is our time to continue to educate ourselves and then educate our colleagues.

As we enter summer and the fall, we will be moving into high gear in our Campaign Plan.

The 2012 Campaign Workgroup and the CTA Board are asking you to approve a proposal to repurpose the October State Council meeting so that we spend that time in our local communities and regions in a massive outreach to voters.

The weeks before the election are too crucial to pull more than 1,000 of our leaders and staff out of the field.

Winning this election will happen in our local communities.

We would put together a system to make sure we can target your involvement in October.

That may be working a phone bank, walking precincts, leafleting, holding a house meeting, being part of a news event, tweeting and posting to Facebook.

There will be plenty of opportunities.

This recommendation will be coming to you as part of the Board Report.

I urge you to support it.

We have a great challenge ahead of us, but this union - all of us - wouldn't be who we are without taking on challenges.

Strategic Planning

And that brings me to one last item today.

We have been talking for a year about building a long-term or strategic plan for CTA.

Critically examining who we are, exploring from the ground up who we want to be and creating a plan to get us there to ensure we are a strong, vital and relevant union to all our members into the future.

I am proud to say we are starting down that path.

Based on recommendations that started right here at this meeting last year, CTA has hired the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon to assist us in this extensive process.

LERC is nationally recognized for its strategic planning expertise and for its work with labor unions across the country.

This will be one of the most important actions our union takes as we assess our challenges, plan for our future and empower our members.

This process is going to start while we are also engaging in this political campaign because the two are intertwined and we must begin to engage our members now.

I want you to know that this process will be very inclusive and very transparent.

Probably all of you in this room will be involved in some form.

Some of you are already part of the Workgroup that started this discussion.

Some of you will be on committees to decide how this process will work.

Some of you will lead discussions in your local areas.

One thing that we have to do is to reach out to members beyond ourselves.

We need to talk to those members who don't always attend CTA meetings.

And we must not be afraid to ask ourselves the tough questions or to propose something new – even if it's not the way we've done it for the last 25 years.

Building this strategic plan is our opportunity to embrace new ideas, engage new members and build the CTA we all want for our future.

Back to Manzanar

You know, it took decades after the Japanese were released from the internment camps for the government to apologize and begin to make reparations.

Today, Manzanar is a national historic site, but that likely wouldn't have happened if it weren't for some of the Japanese American citizens who had lived there and made its restoration their cause.

Instead of being embittered over what happened, they worked to turn it around, and to make sure it would never happen again.

One of those folks was Sue Kunitomi Embry, who passed away in 2006.

When Manzanar become a monument, she said:

“We want to show the world that we are a great nation, willing to say we are sorry about what we did.

And not only that we are a Democracy, but we *work* at it, for all of us.

The working at it is the important part.”

The working is always the important part, and that’s exactly what we have to do in the upcoming months.

We will be up against big money from big business ... we will be dealing with a public that is still trying to figure this out.

And, let’s face it, we are up against those who may be too disinterested to vote.

But we’ve got right and truth on our side.

We just have to use our voice.

Use our voice to say: Public education is important and it’s time to invest in our future.

Use our voice to stand up to the Koch Brothers who want to buy elections.

Use our voice to stand up against those who want to privatize our public schools in the name of reform.

And use our voice to say: We are CTA and we will NOT be silenced!