



Our Strength, Our Task, Our Future

1 message

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The May 16th Coalition is sharing the below article from our partners at the NCAE Organize 2020 Caucus. We hope you find it useful reading as you prepare for this Wednesday in Raleigh.

Our Strength, Our Task, Our Future

NCAE Organize 2020 Caucus

Many of you have been thoughtfully asking, prodding, debating online, what are we going to do on May 16? And more importantly, **what comes next?**

As the NCAE Organize 2020 Caucus, we've been exploring these same questions since our founding in 2013. We were inspired by the powerful organizing and social justice focus of the Chicago Teachers' Union and have been working to bring similar energy to North Carolina. 2018, is a very different moment and yet this year -- full of inspiring organizing by educators in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma, Kentucky and Colorado -- is also a moment of incredible opportunity for us. **Here's what we see.**

When our communities send their young people to us in public schools, many of them can't read, do basic math, share with others very well, sing beautifully, dribble a basketball, understand or control the basic functions of their bodies, or connect their own history with the history of this country. We teach them most of those things. We always hope that our students' families can and will be partners in this work, and they often are. Sometimes, however, they can't be or choose not to be. We take up the work.

We love your children. For many of us, we love them as much as our own. For others, they are the only young people in our lives. We know their quirks. We identify their triggers. We can get them to giggle or let them cry it out. They drive us crazy. Raising a community's children is a physically challenging and deeply emotional task. Not everyone is good at it and too many don't challenge the implicit and explicit biases that we all carry from the culture into the classroom. The overwhelming majority of us are trying really hard, though. If we had the resources we needed, most of us would do this job very well. But it is not something that everyone can or should do.

It doesn't have to be as hard as it is right now, however. We need reasonable class sizes that allow us to give each of our students the individual attention that they deserve. We want the tools required for a world class education that allows them to read, write, reason, compute, create, and build community. We deserve to have our co-workers, the ones that are in love with this job and do it so well, stay in it so that they can teach us the hard-fought lessons of this profession/art/science. We need more copy paper. We want our students to have the healthy food, health care, clean air and water, and the emotional and physical safety that they need in order to come to us healthy and leave us thriving.

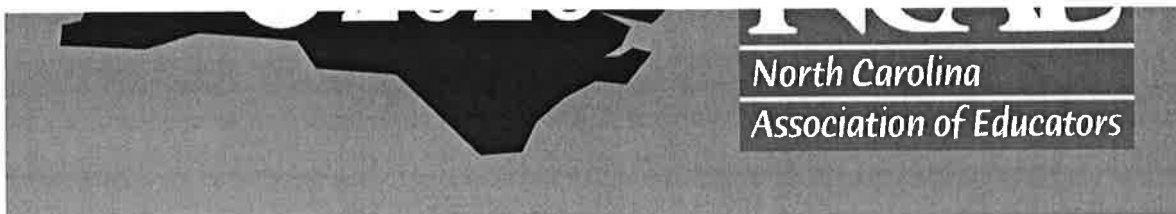
In order for our students to thrive, however, educators must thrive.

We need economic stability, not a second or third job. We need quality health care, affordable housing and money to be able to age with dignity. Everyone deserves these things. We need our community to recognize and respect the sacrifices that we make, and that we ask our families to make, so that we can give our young people what they deserve. To do that well, we need to be able to relax, reflect, plan, exercise, eat well, and have time for fun and our families. Again, everyone deserves this.

Most people don't have these things in North Carolina, and educators spend our days fighting battles that we, and our students, were set up to lose. That isn't just an accident. There are people, human beings just like you and I, who make decisions about our schools, and our students, and us.

On Wednesday, May 16, we're going to see those people. Here's what that's about.





Our Strength

Being a public school educator in North Carolina can feel deeply disempowering. Most of our co-workers end up either leaving the profession, succumbing to cynicism, or closing their doors because "they can only have control there." The policies and practices backed by most of the state's political leaders over the last ten years have made this job a tough one to endure. For many people, putting in for a personal day felt like taking a risk, even though we are legally entitled to them. That's how powerless we had become.

On May 16, however, we are going to be in the streets of Raleigh with tens of thousands of people from across the state, from Manteo to Murphy. It will be transformative.

It already has been. Our hallways and our classrooms have felt a little bit more buoyant since our colleagues in West Virginia took a bold stand for our students and for themselves. We've asked each other: can we do that? Yes, we can. We learned from West Virginia and our educator family in Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky and Colorado. We applied the lessons of decades of fights led by the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE). We embraced the energy of rank and file, building-level organizing, both inside and outside of NCAE locals. We mastered the tools of social media, led by the Charlotte educators who build the NC Teachers United Facebook group, and connected people across the state who had been feeling isolated and alone.

If you are taking a personal day and heading to Raleigh, or you are taking an action somewhere in the state in support of us on May 16, how do you feel right now? If your students, parents, and community are showing you their love and support, do you still feel powerless? If you're in an online group and laughing and arguing and being challenged or affirmed by someone you've never met, do you still feel alone?

Good.

What if it felt like that every day?

It can. Consider the following:

- Public schools are the top employers in the state by far:
 - They are the number one employer in 58 counties
 - They are the number two employer in 25 counties
 - They are the number three employer in 14 counties

- There are roughly 1,500,000 students in public schools
- There are roughly 180,000 people employed in public schools
- Most of those people have some kind of family around them

If we organized students, parents, educators, and the supporters of public schools in this state, we could run every school board, county commission, and city council. We could elect every judge, member of the House and Senate, and Governor. Given the importance of North Carolina on the national electoral map, we could probably impact every Presidential election. Just by going to vote together.

Sometimes, however, voting isn't going to be enough. Supporters of public schools were key in the election of Governor Roy Cooper, and Supreme Court Justice Mike Morgan. Because racist gerrymandering held the General Assembly hostage, however, the state's political leadership essentially led a coup that stripped both of those positions of most of their most meaningful powers.

You'll hear lots of talk about the November elections on May 16. That's important. Look at the numbers again. We could fill up every seat. But also remember what it feels like to be in the streets with tens of thousands of people, all wearing the same color, and all making a sacrifice to be with each other and fight with and for each other and our students. Look around and imagine what would happen if all of those people sent an email to, or called, the same human being on the same day. What if we all spent our money somewhere specific, or specifically didn't? What if we showed up, with all of those people, at every school board meeting? What if everyone there joined NCAE at the same time and local leaders could get the time and support that they needed to become the skilled organizers we need? What if we correct Phil Berger?

 This isn't union-*like* activity. **It's union activity.**

If this legislative session results in any additional resources or supports going to public schools, it's because educators acting together demonstrated just how many and how powerful we are. If this legislative session ends without putting our students' needs before tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, the political leaders in the General Assembly have made it clear which side of the line they stand on. Either way, we've already won and we're poised for the wins to follow. We have defeated fear and demonstrated just how powerful we are when we are together. That is no small feat.

In the streets of Raleigh next week, we both demonstrate and celebrate.





Our Task

May 16 isn't a beginning, but it is a watershed.

Educators have been fighting back against the attacks on public schools for decades. The veterans of the wars against Jim Crow schools are here with us, after all. Educators around the state remember the Decline to Sign campaign in 2013. We have successes in local electoral efforts, and can even demonstrate a critical impact on the election of the Governor. We proudly stood together to stop the deportation of Wildin Acosta. We have voted together in powerful ways. We have lobbied and learned about legislators. We have harassed decision-makers away from privatizing our schools. We have stuck up for one another and our kids in our buildings. We have sued the state. We have written emails, made phone calls, marched, sat in, gotten arrested and continued to push for new ways to have an impact.

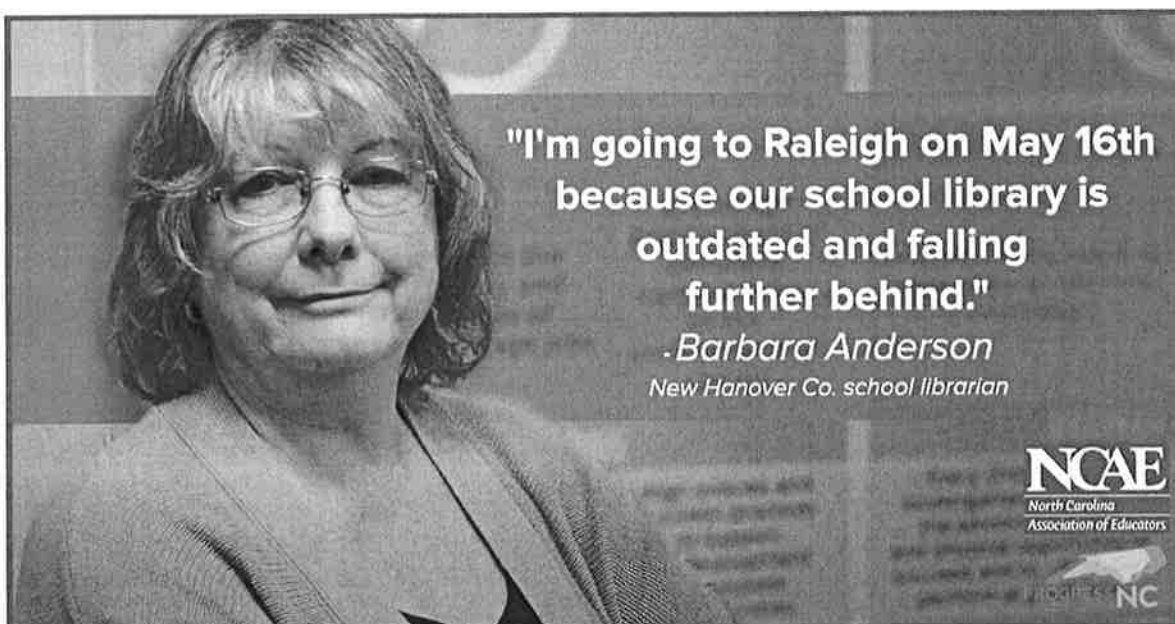
Thanks to our colleagues in West Virginia, we have found a new way. It took some work to get our co-workers to make this choice. There was fear. There was intimidation. There was guilt. There was our concern for our students. Ultimately, out of that concern for our students, and our own families, educators took a big step. That step has resulted in the closing down of over 30 school districts across the state, and will certainly fill the streets of downtown Raleigh with red like Charleston, Oklahoma City, Denver, and Phoenix before us. This has been a huge test. The political leadership of the state is getting a sense of what we're capable of when we act together. So are we.

But we also know that we can't just go to Raleigh and lobby. We've done that before. This time, we're bringing everybody with us, and we need answers. On Day 1, legislators get sworn in and make a public commitment. There are two choices: do they want our young people to have everything that they deserve to survive, or will they give away desperately-needed tax dollars to the wealthy and corporations. Which side are they on?

We're not going to be fooled. If they suddenly decide to invest in our schools after years of deprivation, we know why. If they don't, we have options.

We also have a responsibility to tell our story. Bring a witty or powerful sign. Wear a costume that makes you feel powerful. Organize a marching band. Bring student art. Bring student performers. Perform. Talk to people on the streets about how much you love public schools.

Listen to them tell you the same. Take photos and make videos. Post them on social media. Some serious territory will be ours for a little while. Let's make the most of it.



Our Future

The dismantling of public schools in North Carolina didn't happen in a day; and we won't leave Raleigh on May 16 with the schools that our students deserve, no matter what happens. Understandably, people have been wanting to know what we are asking for, what are our demands?

Yes, there are a lot of us that are going to Raleigh because we want to be paid more. That's true. Most of us work 50-60 hours a week at our main job, and many of us can't afford our bills without another job or two. We work every weekend. The alleged "two months of free time" never materializes (just ask us). We want to spend time with our families. We want to go to the doctor. We want to be able to stop working at some point in our lives. Those are fair expectations, and they are not being met. We're pretty sure sexism has something to do with it.

And yes, we also want "more than just raises for teachers." We want a professional pay scale that values veteran educators. We want resources and supplies and safe infrastructure for our students. They should have small class sizes and a curriculum that affirms their humanity. They should have health care and safe housing. They should have counselors, nurses, and social workers. They should have clean air and water. They should have everything that they need and deserve.

They can have it.

In about a month, North Carolina's educators went from being relatively politically unengaged and docile to defeating fear, intimidation, and cynical attempts to shame us. We are not walking

out on our students. We are standing up for them and for each other. We have done it quickly and at a scale that most people in this state could not have imagined even a week ago.

That wasn't magic, it was organizing. It was relationship building, and connection making, and information sharing, and data gathering, and training, and coaching, and failing, and succeeding. There is an art to it, but it is mostly a science. Within the last few months, educators across the country have hypothesized that we were more powerful than most of us imagined. We were right.

But power doesn't happen on a day. More than anything, May 16th represents a commitment to run our own lives. The General Assembly didn't give us permission to do this. We certainly don't need their permission to call ourselves a union. More importantly, we don't need their permission to act like one.

Here's what that means. We need to learn the lessons from all of these smart social media activists. There's real power in these connections. Every county should have a local Facebook page where educators and our supporters can connect, share ideas and resources, pick each other up, and cheer each other on. Every educator should wear red every Wednesday, gather together with their co-workers, and take a photo to share with your colleagues across the county and state. Leadership teams should come together every month to assess what's happening and make plans. Members should gather once a month to connect to collective work, offer input from their buildings, and form bonds across schools with co-workers who stand together. There should be regular communication via email, phone, and face to face conversations in buildings.

We have to organize. Constantly. Make a plan. Take action. Find new leaders. Train and support them. Set them loose. Organize teams to knock on doors this summer, and get to know your community better. Attend summer organizing and leadership trainings held by the NCAE Organize 2020 Caucus. Commit to knowing your building deeply, harnessing the strengths of your co-workers, and taking effective action together. Admit when your approach isn't working and make changes. Learn from, and share, successes. That's what organizing is. And it's the only chance we have.

And once we've organized, we've got to use that organization to rebuild our schools. To elect leaders that will fight for us and our students. We have to get educators elected, too. In Durham, Organize 2020 Caucus members have organized to elect school board members and county commissioners, who have invested in our schools. But we can't settle for changes at the county level; the state holds the purse strings.

If May 16th is going to matter, we have to build our union. From the Facebook pages and building discussions, it's clear that there are mixed feelings about NCAE. Some people don't feel like the organization's body of work is worth the cost of membership. Other people were once members and had bad experiences. Some people think we are "too political." Other

people don't think that we fight hard enough. Still others just haven't had access to know anything.

We hear you, but we need to ask everybody to use their imaginations. And we need to roll up our sleeves. That's why we started the Organize 2020 Caucus. We saw educators across the country building their unions to transform public education in some of the largest school districts, and we wanted the same for our kids and our colleagues.

NCAE is made up of people, just like the General Assembly. Not everyone in NCAE agrees about everything, and there is no one way to "be NCAE." We need you. If thousands of new leaders joined it on the 16th, it would become a different organization overnight. If you think "it" should be doing something, step up and offer your ideas and your labor. Bring a team with you. Our union is what we make it. We know it's a sacrifice to pay dues. Going to Raleigh on May 16 is a sacrifice too. Let's think creatively.

The only thing we have is each other. The political leadership in Raleigh is afraid of us now, because we are organized. From here, we can win things for our students and each other. From here, we can have the future we deserve. No one is going to give us anything. We have to get organized and go get it. Our students, our co-workers, and our families are worth it. So are we.

Let's demonstrate and celebrate our strength on May 16.

Let's put our legislators on public notice and tell our stories.

Let's commit ourselves to organizing for a future we deserve.

Let's win.



Demand that legislators take a side: the futures of our young people, or tax breaks for the wealthy and corporations

OUR STRENGTH

Our numbers make us powerful in our schools, our streets, and the ballot box

OUR FUTURE

Build your team, get connected, and go home ready to do the work of winning the schools our students deserve

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