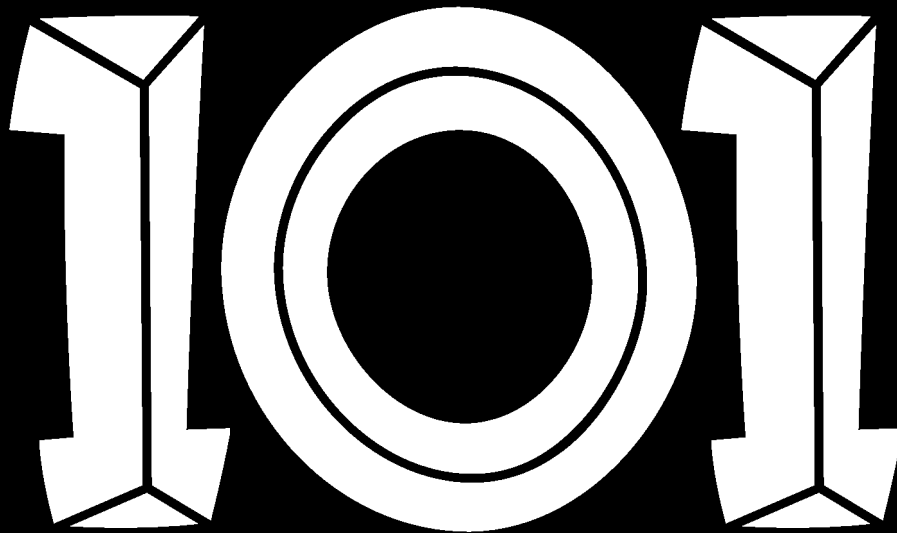


**You're in the largest professional union in the United States. Knowing what that means can make your job and your paycheck better. But only if you get involved.**

BY CYNTHIA KOPKOWSKI

# ASSOCIATION



**E**ver faked a knowing nod when a veteran teacher starts talking about being in a “right-to-work state,” and you’re not really sure what she’s talking about? Does “collective bargaining” just make you think of

your third-period class trying to get out of having homework? As a new educator, it can seem easier to teach physics to first-graders than to learn about your own union, much less become an active and involved member of it. But you need to do all three—get in, get educated, and get active. Your commitment has to go beyond just paying dues. But remember, the payoff is big.

“Teachers sometimes feel alone and scared of what the principal will say if they speak up as a union member,” says Samone Thomas, 36, a seventh-grade language arts teacher in Wichita, Kansas. “But that means you don’t know you have all these thousands of people behind you working to make things better.”

Having a basic understanding of your union, then building on it with personal involvement, are the first steps toward better working conditions, pay, and benefits.

So if you’re ready to find out more about what you’re getting for your investment (besides this magazine!), and how you can reap additional rewards through your involvement, here’s a primer on what Association membership

means. (First tip: Your membership means you belong to the local, state, and national Association.)

**Help on the Job**—If you want to become a better teacher, you’re off to a good start. The Association offers its member teachers advice, training, and other assistance to boost skills in the classroom, including teacher evaluation, mentoring, and tools to help prepare for certification tests. NEA even has a Teacher Toolkit ([www.nea.org/marketplace](http://www.nea.org/marketplace))

with free basic tools to help you handle class rosters, daily attendance, and behavior and intervention logs. And the NEA Foundation provides teachers with grants to get their projects off the ground ([www.neafoundation.org](http://www.neafoundation.org)).

### **A Strong Professional Network**—

There’s lots of formal assistance from the Association. But don’t forget that you’re also plugged into a network of people who have been there, done that. They know the kids, the administrators, and the parents, and they can help you do your best and avoid the minefields.

You’re on their team and they’re

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—Lawrence Garcia  
math teacher, Thornton, Colorado



## GLOSSARY

**as-so-ci-a-tion, union, guild, brother-hood** All the same thing. It's a group that works collectively to improve working conditions and wages.

**bar-gain-ing u-nit** The group made up of employees that negotiates with employers on things like salary and benefits.

**building rep** A staff member who serves as a liaison between the staff union members and the administration. In a building with a strong union (that is, a lot of vocal and active members like you), they can typically address issues not covered by a contract to improve working conditions.

**col-lect-ive bar-gain-ing** The negotiation of a contract—including wages, benefits, and working conditions—between employers and employees. Some states, especially in the South, don't have collective bargaining. (Even though there is still typically a grievance or due process system legally guaranteed.)

**griev-ance** A dispute between a union member and management over a workplace situation or alleged contract violation that is handled through a procedure outlined in the contract or a state law or regulation. The grievance system facilitates your right to due process.

**or-gan-iz-ing** Drawing on the power of members' unified strength (3.2 million and counting in the NEA!), this is the action by which members lobby for changes, seek improvements in their working conditions, or work for any other important step that members determine is a priority.

**"right-to-work state"** States where unions can't negotiate agreements that require all employees covered by a collective bargaining agreement to pay for the costs of union representation. Such agreements eliminate "free riders" who enjoy the benefits of an agreement without supporting or joining the union.

**Uni-Serv di-rec-tor** That's the professional union staff member you can turn to when you have a professional problem.

Email your comments on this story to [ckopkowski@nea.org](mailto:ckopkowski@nea.org)

on yours. If you don't know who the Association members in your building are, call your local Association office and they'll point you in the right direction.

**Protection**—Experienced advocates called UniServ directors advise or represent members in employment-related matters. If a principal unfairly accuses you of being ineffective, the UniServ director is the one to call on. Plus, if a legal issue arises, you've got at least \$1 million in liability insurance as a member of the Association. Now, while you're in your first few years of teaching (usually three) you're on probation and don't have many of the protections you will get later on. But you do have rights, and the Association staff at your local office can tell you about them, while helping you avoid getting into a situation in which you would have to fight for your job.

**Wage and Benefits Watchdogs**—An experienced Association staff helps the people sitting down at the bargaining table to fight for your pay increases and benefits. They do research and plan public relations campaigns to make the public understand the importance of properly paying educators. There's also training offered to help individual members sharpen their salary and benefits bargaining skills. Plus, there are top-notch lobbyists fighting for Association members' rights in Congress, the state legislature, and the school board.

**Fighting for Fair Funding**—Those lobbyists working with legislators on better education policy are also making impassioned arguments for improved school funding. They let legislators know about the needs, interests, and priorities of teachers. For example, you're not the only one talking about what's wrong with the so-called No Child Left Behind law. NEA lobbyists are fighting to get the law changed the way you want to see it reformed.

**Extra Benefits, Fun Perks**—You can get insurance discounts,

## ANYTHING ELSE I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT?

Yep. The NEA Fund for Children and Public Education. That's a fundraising group with a simple purpose—get pro-public education candidates elected at the local, state, and national level. Because when elected officials want to work for, not against, you, it can improve your working conditions, pay, and benefits.

If you're wondering who makes up this fundraising group, the answer is "You do." The NEA Fund relies entirely on voluntary contributions from Association members. And if someone tells you, "Oh, that's what our dues money goes for," tell them that's a common misconception. (You'll look like the smartest one in the teachers' lounge!) No dues dollars can go to political campaigns. It has to come from Fund donations.

If you want to make a difference for yourself, your colleagues, and your students, the best way to do that is to donate to the Fund. With 3.2 million members nationwide, imagine the possibilities if everyone donated just a few bucks a month. Head to [www.neafund.org](http://www.neafund.org) to learn more.

cheaper movie tickets, and coupons for stores like Target, Ann Taylor, and Best Buy through NEA Member Benefits ([www.neamb.com](http://www.neamb.com)).

Understanding more about what your Association does can't be the end of your involvement though. A strong and healthy union relies on the participation of all of its members, which means becoming more aware of the issues that affect you and your colleagues and taking action.

As a union member, "I'm very involved in how I think the school should look," says Lawrence Garcia, 35, a middle school math teacher in Thornton, Colorado. But he can't do it alone. "If I'm going to make a change here, nobody downtown will listen to me if I'm by myself."

Here's how members like Garcia say they need your help: Consider becoming a building representative, who serves as a liaison between teachers and support professionals and the administration.

"Every organization is dependent on the new members coming in," says Amy Murphy, a 26-year-old teacher in Tampa, Florida. She became a building rep during her second year as a teacher. "I was scared

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—**Samone Thomas**  
language arts teacher  
Wichita, Kansas


to pieces, but decided I wanted to be involved," says Murphy. "As I'm learning more and more it gets easier."

You can also go to school board meetings and use the public comment portion of the session to talk about issues affecting the classroom or teachers.

Register to vote and exercise that vote for pro-public education candidates. Donate to the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education (see "Anything Else?" page 34) to help elect those candidates. Call,

email, or visit with elected officials in your city and state to tell them your priorities.

"Lobbying gave me a chance to actually stand up for what I believe in and affect the course of education in our state," says Jana Thomas, 24, a high school Spanish and English teacher in Republic, Missouri.

Through involvement—taking on issues that affect both the classroom and the contract—a community of educators grows stronger. "In your first year it feels like you're alone on the planet, but this Association gives you a community," Thomas says. "You can talk to and help each other." 



## THE SUPPORT CHAIN

It can seem a little confusing at times. Am I a member of my local Association or the state one? And what's the national? Short answer: you belong to all three, and that means three times the aid and protection.

### LOCAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Your most immediate contact for getting professional support. This group comprises you and your colleagues from your immediate geographic region and deals with your district administration.

### STATE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

In every state, there is a group that advances the cause of public education and works to improve the pay, benefits, and respect for member educators and support professionals. That's the state Association. They're the ones who lobby the state legislature about education funding and other issues that affect you.

### NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Like the state Association, the National Education Association works on improving working conditions and salaries for teachers and support professionals through advocacy and research. The focus at the national level is on federal legislators, the President, and national policy.