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Teacher of the Year to Union President

Lily Eskelsen García is poised to take over at the NEA

by RICHARD LEE COLVIN

Just above the sofa in the comfortable office of Lily Eskelsen García, the 58-year-old president-in-waiting of the National Education Association (NEA), 10 class pictures of young children are on display. The faces of the 4th, 5th, and 6th graders she taught at Orchard Elementary School in suburban Salt Lake City in the 1980s are small and faded, and their smiles convey little about them or their lives.

But Eskelsen García knows their stories, and she's happy to tell them. The student with a learning disability she awarded an "A" for drawing a picture and describing the three branches of government to his class. The boy who grew up to be a staffer on Capitol Hill. The girl and boy from different classes who later married and sent her a wedding picture.

Eskelsen García had the photographs put up when she became vice president of the union that claims 3 million members to show visitors that she sees herself, first and foremost, as a teacher.

"This is who I am, this is my expertise, this is what I bring to this job," Eskelsen García explains.

It's been 24 years since Eskelsen García left full-time teaching, one year after being recognized as Utah's Teacher of the Year in 1989. The honor gave her a statewide audience, and, a natural entertainer, she used the turn in the spotlight to become an outspoken advocate for teachers. That year, the Utah legislature cut taxes rather than use a budget surplus to increase education spending that had been flat for three years. Utah governor Norman Bangert dismissed teachers' criticisms, telling them

publicly they should take two aspirin and "go back to work." The comment touched off a one-day statewide teachers' strike, and at a rally Eskelsen García strapped on her guitar and sang a protest song she'd written for the occasion: "The Utah Teacher Blues."

The song's last verse seemed to foretell her future:

*When we speak with one voice, no one can be confused /
It's time to show the world we can do more than sing the blues /
I know what I can do to wipe those tears away /
I'm gonna sign on the dotted line and join the NEA.*



PHOTO / ADAM AUEL

She was urged to run for a leadership position in the Utah Education Association (UEA), the NEA's state affiliate, and was elected president as a write-in candidate, despite having held no previous union position. The next year, teachers received a 6 percent increase in compensation championed by Bangerter himself, although the UEA was pushing for an increase of double that. Over the next six years, Eskelsen García pushed unrelentingly for higher salaries, which were among the lowest in the nation, and for smaller classes, which were among the largest.

Utah ranked 50th among the states in average teacher's salary in 2011, and its class sizes were among the largest. Nonetheless, Utah's scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have been at or above the national average in reading, mathematics, and science over the past two decades.

Having experienced the exhilaration that comes with influence, Eskelsen García ran for Congress in 1998 as a Democrat in a district that included Salt Lake City. Her campaign was criticized for its negativity, and she lost badly.

Beginning in 1996, she served on the NEA's nine-person executive committee, a half-time union position, and then in 2002, defeated two other candidates to become the union's secretary-treasurer. After moving to the NEA's headquarters in Washington, D.C., she assumed the vice presidency in 2008 when Dennis Van Roekel, a high school math teacher in Arizona for 23 years, became president. Union rules limit presidents to two three-year terms, and Eskelsen García is running unopposed to replace him. So, this July 4 in Denver, during the annual meeting of the NEA's 9,000-delegate representative assembly, she will almost assuredly become the union's first woman president since Mary Hatwood Futrell was elected in 1983.

In her new role, she says, she will use stories from her teaching days to connect with NEA members as well as with the union's critics.

"I know what got me elected state president," Eskelsen García confides. "Members would tell me, 'You said it just the way I felt it. You expressed my frustration, my heartbreak,



Lily Eskelsen García speaks in front of the Texas State Capitol in Austin, December 2013

my joy, and what got me into this.’ They encouraged me to just keep talking like I was talking, because that’s how they felt.” She was unscripted then and vows that, as NEA president, she will continue to speak her mind without the help of speechwriters.

She also says she will continue to use her Teacher of the Year recognition, as she did in Utah, to disarm critics. “I did it shamelessly because people really do respect teachers, and it didn’t fit their mental model of a union activist,” she says.

She will be the first Hispanic head of the nation’s largest union, and a powerful labor and political leader. Even so, she sees her organization as facing an existential threat.

“We feel embattled,” Eskelsen García says. “People have decided to take us out in a metaphorical war.”

Challenges from the Right, Left, and Center

The NEA was founded in 1857 by teachers and administrators as an advocate for public education, not a union. It wasn’t until 1969 that the NEA endorsed the concept of collective bargaining, nearly a decade after the American Federation of Teachers had done so. Ever since, the organization’s leaders have had to manage a tension among members regarding its identity. Is it a union? Or is it a professional organization? In 1997, NEA president Bob Chase declared that school quality was a union issue. In a speech at the National Press Club, he said that the NEA could no longer focus only on improving wages and benefits. “While this narrow, traditional agenda remains important, it is utterly inadequate to the needs of the future. It will not serve our members’ interest in greater professionalism. It will not serve the interests of America’s children, the children we teach, the children who motivated us to go into teaching in the first place.”

Chase’s speech and stance were controversial, and the NEA retreated from those positions, despite accusations from anti-union conservatives and some civil rights leaders that it was sublimating the needs of children to the welfare of its members. Teachers unions could ignore such critiques because they could field tens of thousands of volunteers and spend millions of dollars on pro-union political candidates and lobbying to block most legislation they deemed injurious.

Now, however, the unions are being challenged from the political right, left, and center, as well as by a growing insurgency from members who want them to help improve their teaching, not just protect their perceived employee rights.

Eskelsen García says it’s not just unions that are at risk,

but the entire public education system. As a leader, she knows the motivating value of identifying and vilifying an enemy to build unity among her members. Among those she counts as enemies of public education are proponents of charter schools and vouchers. She said their goal is to “show that public schools have failed and can’t be trusted and they are going to swoop in with their answer,” which is privatization of public education.

The election of Wisconsin governor Scott Walker in 2010, who has fought to weaken public sector unions, was a wake-up call. The NEA and other unions invested heavily in a campaign to recall Walker and several of his allies in the legislature, but lost. Governors in Michigan, Ohio, Florida, Indiana, and other states also have moved, with varying success, to undercut the power and influence of unions.

Eskelsen García and other union leaders also see themselves as under attack by “self-described” education reformers and centrist Democrats who favor charter schools, performance evaluations that factor in student achievement, and changes to long-standing practices that mean teachers hired last lose their jobs first in the event of budget cuts or declines in enrollment. A small but loud and angry faction of teachers and advocates on the political left want the NEA and the AFT to be more aggressive in resisting those efforts, which they associate with the Obama administration.

In addition, the proportion of younger teachers, who are less likely to see teaching as a lifelong career, is increasing

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rapidly. The sensibilities and interests of these teachers are not always aligned with established union positions, and membership in alternative groups is growing (see “Taking Back Teaching,” *features*, Spring 2013).

Membership Declines

In a report to the union’s representative assembly in the summer of 2013, the NEA claimed that these dynamics, as well as the

rapid spread of online learning, were depressing membership. In 2011, the NEA had stated that it expected a membership loss of more than 300,000 teachers and support personnel between 2010 and 2014, which would result in \$65 million less in revenue. That prediction turned out to be overly pessimistic; in 2013–14 NEA has 65,000 more full-time teacher-members than had been expected and revenues are \$6.1 million higher.

But, the 2013 report warned, the union's membership will continue to decline.

Ruben Murillo, president of the Nevada State Education Association, has described the situation this way: "With all the defeats, if we keep doing the same thing over and over again, we're going to cease to exist as an organization."

Although the union's leaders agree, they also believe that the organization's current problems represent an opportunity to reposition the NEA to lead efforts to improve public education rather than block them, just as Bob Chase had recommended.

"Future members and education historians will talk about this pivotal moment in the education union movement," says James P. Testerman, senior director of the NEA's Center for Organizing. "We will have either successfully pivoted to being a union that advocates not only for its members but truly advocates for professional practice that makes a difference for kids...or else the role and influence of public education-sector unions will be significantly diminished."

Key to which of those two outcomes occurs is Eskelsen García, known within the NEA simply as "Lily."

"Teachers love Lily," says Maddie Fennell, an Omaha, Nebraska, teacher who led an NEA commission on professionalizing the workforce. "She can go into a crowd of a thousand people and come out with all of them wanting to chat with her because she is so personable. Even in a large crowd, she makes you feel like she's talking straight to you, and they feel like she's reflecting them and their concerns."

Eskelsen García can be blunt, as when last summer she told a group of liberal bloggers that supporters of gun rights "are going to hell." Urging the audience to take action, she said, "We have to make the senators as frightened of us as they are of the gun lobby.... Shame on us if we give one inch."

Eskelsen García is equally adamant that current policies that stress testing, accountability, and school choice are wrong for kids as well as for teachers. "You know, when something's stupid you have to call it stupid," she said in an interview.

Such unambiguous assertions appeal to her members emotionally. Her counterpart, AFT president Randi Weingarten,

tends instead to make sophisticated, politically astute policy arguments—such as her declaration that teachers should not be evaluated using students' scores on tests that are outdated and not aligned with what teachers are trying to teach. After she made that position public, some state and local leaders fell in line and began raising the question of whether new assessments and new teachers' evaluations were on a collision course. Only in February, many months after Weingarten spoke out, did Van Roekel take the same position.

John Wilson, former executive director of the NEA, says teachers today "are ready to revolt" over the same policies

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Eskelsen Garcia calls "stupid." "Her challenge will be to manage that anger and position the NEA to push some substantive redirections around education in this country," he said.

Eskelsen Garcia agrees and says frequently that it's not enough for the union to just block bad ideas.

"We're really good at being able to explain why something is a stupid idea," she told a panel sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute in 2010. "But it begs the question of what is a better idea, and my organization now, I think, is much more open than we've ever been on the local, state, and national level about taking on that challenge of designing something better."

A Better Education

Born Lilia Laura Pace in Texas in 1955, Eskelsen García did not think about going to college or becoming a teacher when she was growing up. Her father worked on missile guidance systems for the U.S. Army, and her mother, who was from Panama, dropped out of school after the 8th grade. Her mother spoke Spanish but wanted her daughter to speak English so she wouldn't face discrimination.

She moved frequently as a child, living in Texas, Georgia, Alaska, Washington, and Colorado, before graduating from high school in Utah in 1973. She married Ruel Eskelsen as

soon as she graduated. Her husband enlisted in the Army, and during one of his postings, she got a job in a school cafeteria. A kindergarten teacher at the school noticed how well she connected with the students and urged her to go to college to become a teacher.

Several years later, after her husband got out of the Army, they both enrolled at the University of Utah, supporting themselves with help from the GI Bill, loans, financial aid, and money they earned singing, accompanied by Eskelsen García on the guitar. She graduated magna cum laude with a degree in elementary education and later earned a master's degree in instructional technology. She began teaching at Orchard Elementary School outside of Salt Lake City in 1980 and recalls the experience fondly. Teachers worked as a team, sharing ideas and taking on additional duties to allow a colleague to spend more time with a group of kids producing a play or exploring a topic such as the civil rights movement in greater depth. Her love of music found its way into many of her lessons— she taught her students to memorize the Preamble to the Constitution by singing it, for example. She learned quickly from more experienced teachers, who shared their “incredible wealth of knowledge” informally.

When she toured Utah after being named Teacher of the Year, she was surprised to find that Orchard's creative, collaborative, professional culture was noticeably absent in other schools. As NEA president, Eskelsen García wants to encourage more schools to operate the way Orchard did.

“Everyone's Worst Nightmare”

But, she says, the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB), in effect since 2002, is making it impossible for teachers to teach creatively and provide students with a well-rounded education. NCLB, she says, was “everyone's worst nightmare” because of the importance it placed on test scores. It redefined education as whether “you hit your cut score on a standardized test and, if you have, then you have been educated.”

To Eskelsen García, standardized testing is just one particularly noxious element of what she calls “GERM,” which she says stands for “global education reform movement.” Speaking to a large gathering of union leaders in Austin,

Texas, in December 2013, she decried “corporate model competition” among schools, the privatization of public education via charters and vouchers to be used for private schools, and the deskilling of teaching. “You make everybody read the script; you have to be on page 33 at the same time and the same day in every class,” she said.

Yet Eskelsen García is a big fan of another prominent “reform,” the common core academic standards now being instituted in schools across the country (see “The Common Core Takes Hold” and “Navigating the Common Core,” *features*, Summer 2014). Although critics have



PHOTO / ADAM AUDEL

Lily Eskelsen García in her office at NEA headquarters, with a portrait of Gabriel García Márquez by her husband Alberto García in the background

said teachers were not involved, she says expert teachers marked up drafts with red pens, and the authors of the standards agreed to most of their changes. “Every time I turned the page I thought, my God, this is how I teach, it really was,” she says. “Critical thinking skills, collaborate on problem solving, create, design, give me evidence of, give me your opinion and tell me why I should believe you, and organize a project.”

But she fears that standardized tests will not include those skills and that they'll be eliminated from the curriculum.

“Do we think they’re going to get this right without adult supervision?” she asked the audience in Austin. “Noooooo,” the crowd responded.

“If you see that there is no change in high-stakes testing; no change in obsessive test prep; no change in labeling students, teachers, and schools by that standardized test score, you’ll know that they don’t really care about higher-level, critical thinking skills, and that it was all just a PR ploy.”

She urged her colleagues to resist. Assessments, she said, have their place. They should be used to guide instruction rather than to judge performance.

“It’s up to us to insist they get it right and to call them out when they get it wrong,” she said.

Fiery Rhetoric

Eskelsen García portrays teachers as hardworking heroes who are under attack by wealthy, implacable, money-hungry foes.

Despite protestations that the NEA is being outgunned politically, it is perennially among the nation’s top spenders on lobbying and election campaigns.

“The folks in this room are putting battle gear on,” she said later. “They are fearless warriors.”

The words conjure up the image of an industrial union, proudly defending labor against the predations of distant bosses. But it does little to help rebrand the NEA as an advocate for professionalism, children, and learning, which Eskelsen García says she favors.

To help bolster the professional image, Van Roekel persuaded the union’s representative assembly to dun members \$3 apiece annually over 10 years to amass a \$60 million Great Public Schools Fund the union could invest in the ideas of NEA members. He has promoted a partnership with Teach Plus, the organization whose goal is to respond to the desire of teachers to take on broader leadership roles in their schools and districts. Under his leadership, the NEA formed another partnership to identify promising teacher leaders and train them to help their peers become leaders as well.

Eskelsen García worked closely with Van Roekel on those initiatives.

But what Eskelsen García really thinks is needed is systemic change in how teachers are recruited, trained, hired,

mentored, evaluated, tenured, and helped to improve. Finland, she says, offers a good model.

There, she says, it is more difficult to enter the college of education than it is to get into law school, and teachers need to earn a master’s degree before they’re allowed to lead a classroom. But nothing will change, she says, unless teachers become advocates for their profession. “We’re absolutely sure that without not just the voices but the actions, the hands-on advocacy that the practitioners bring, policymakers are going to get it wrong again.”

A Strong Offense and a Stronger Defense

Eskelsen García and Van Roekel say the union needs to have both a good offense, which includes efforts to improve student outcomes and support teachers, and a good defense. The goal of the defense is to block state initiatives that would weaken the union as well as to preserve the victories the NEA has made in the past.

The NEA’s budget for defense is far greater than the budget for offense. Indeed, despite protestations that the NEA is being outgunned politically, it is perennially among the nation’s top spenders on lobbying and election campaigns. For the year ending September 2013, the NEA spent \$45 million on lobbying and another \$85 million on gifts, grants, and contributions. In most states, the NEA’s affiliates are widely regarded as the most

politically potent forces shaping state laws and policies.

“Goal No. 1 is really to play defense to make sure conditions under which teachers teach and kids learn are the best they can be,” says James Testerman, who heads the NEA’s organizing operation. “We want to make sure those things that attract and retain good teachers are in place. Competitive wages, competitive health care, a reasonable workload and... advocate at the same time for what needs to be in place for students to be successful.”

The defensive effort also includes campaigns to fight legislation, such as the successful 2007 campaign in Utah to overturn a state law promoting vouchers for online schools, and the campaign in Ohio to reverse a law that took away most collective-bargaining rights from public-sector unions.

One place the NEA lost, despite forming a broad coalition of allies, was in Wisconsin. The defeat forced the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association (MTEA), which had a reputation as one of the most radical in the country, to change. The MTEA is now working with the Milwaukee Public Schools to implement a new teacher-evaluation process,

feature

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PHOTO / RICHARD LEE COLVIN

Lily Eskelsen García and others sing the union anthem "Solidarity Forever" in front of the Texas State Capitol in Austin, December 2013

implement common core standards, and provide training for substitute teachers.

Still, in an interview in her office, Eskelsen García said the unions are far less powerful than they were in their heyday in the 1970s and 1980s.

But, she acknowledged, that may be for the best.

"When you feel like you don't need anybody's help and you'll just do it on your own, you just talk to yourselves about what it is we need out there," she said. "You forget to ask parents what is it they're looking for for their kids, and you forget to ask taxpayers what they think is a good investment of their tax dollars."

She said the union has to come up with good ideas as alternatives to the policies it does not like.

"Shame on us all if all we do is tell you why that it is the wrong answer," she said. "I'm a good teacher because I can

design something that works for real kids. Why can't I put that to work as a union leader... and say, here's a better system and it all needs to be integrated, and work together on it. Why isn't that union work?"

Throughout her career as a union leader, Eskelsen García has been willing to speak to people who disagree with her about ways to improve the quality of education. At a 2010 forum in Washington, she told the audience, "I will listen to your ideas and maybe you'll listen to my ideas. I will work with you. I have to make this work more than you do. My colleagues and I have more skin in this game than anyone outside the children."

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