Segregation of the school system had cascading effects on life in the South. The National Education Association (NEA) provided a professional association for teachers, and works with affiliates at the state and local level. These affiliates were segregated, as well. The NEA maintained its relationship with these affiliates. This left teachers of all races who worked in non-white schools without professional representation. In response, these teachers formed their own professional association. It was called the American Teachers Association (ATA) and had state affiliates in every formally segregated state.

The ATA was formed under its original title National Colored Teachers Association in 1906, before being changed to the American Teachers Association in 1937. It offered African-Americans living in the South a rare opportunity to be represented as professionals. Beginning in 1926, the ATA and the NEA worked together to "stimulate cooperative use of the two organizations’ resources in energetic approaches to professional problems arising from racial and human relationships in American schools." There is a series in the Collection containing records from this Committee. The ATA would merge with the NEA in 1966 under the name of the latter, and the series contains documents mentioning a possible merger. There are records found in two series covering the merger of the two associations, specifically their state affiliates. The series are the records of the Executive Office and the records of the Member and Affiliate Relations Office. In both cases, the records were created during and after the mergers and are mostly evaluations of how successful (or not) the merger was in each state.

After the merger, NEA committed itself more fully to the fight for civil rights for all Americans. In 1968, a Human and Civil Rights Division was created that sponsored workshops, trainings, and conferences for members, leaders, and staff, trained minorities and women to assume leadership roles within the Association, and provided content and technical information to members and affiliates on meeting challenges such as closing the achievement gaps, dropouts, overcoming discrimination and stereotyping based on race, ethnicity, income, gender, language, or sexual orientation, and eliminating bullying and sexual harassment in our schools.