For most of its history, the NEA viewed itself as a professional association, rather than as a teachers’ union. In line with this philosophy, the Association refused to engage in collective bargaining as a tool, either to increase salaries or job security. This was an era when teachers rarely had tenure, and without tenure, teachers had little job security and often served at the whim of a school board or administrator. The NEA did not leave educators defenseless, however; instead they found ways to provide ‘soft’ protection, aimed at individuals rather than groups and using words rather than actions.

Tenure was first studied as a form of job security for teachers in the early 20th Century. Material produced from those studies can be found in the Research Division and its publication the Research Bulletin. There was a Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom which worked with teachers who were fired unjustly. The Association also started the DuShane Fund, which was set up to provide financial assistance to “members of the profession who [were] unjustly treated and whose cases are important to the welfare of the profession.”

By 1974, the Fund was targeted to defending teachers against violations of their civil and human rights. In addition, the Fund was now available to affiliated associations rather than only individual members. This was part of a shift towards more vocal protection of educators’ rights.