Until the late 1960s, NEA rarely addressed political issues that were not directly related to schools. Although they rarely sought to alter education policy, they didn't shy away from taking on social and political issues related to education. When poor education of soldiers proved a problem in WWII, they teamed up with the American Legion to create the American Education Week. That partnership would lead NEA to address larger political issues, such as providing American Legion approved teaching aids to teach about communism in the classroom. They also addressed larger social issues that impacted schools and schoolchildren. The most notable case was Project Juvenile Delinquency, an attempt to address the causes of juvenile delinquency and offer solutions that lawmakers and teachers might work together on. Over time, the range of issues the Association tried to address spread to teenage pregnancy, student rights, lowering the voting age, incentivization of students and teachers and vaccinations.

Although NEA hesitated to act as a strong advocate to change policies, they knew they needed to understand what effect laws could have on teachers and schools. As such, they opened a Legislation & Federal Relations Division. As its confidence in defending educators’ rights grew, the Association began to feel that its interests required entering national politics. In 1969, Clement Haynesworth was a candidate for the Supreme Court and NEA decided to take a public position on a candidate for political office for the first time. While working in the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, Haynesworth issued a number of rulings that seemed to favor of school segregation. In the early 1970s, NEA formed a political action committee, called NEA-PAC, and created the Government Relations Department to promote their objectives with elected officials through lobbying efforts.

During the 1970s, the NEA began to pursue what became the culmination of their political advocacy; a cabinet level department solely for education. In 1979, that goal was achieved when the Department of Education was formed. The growing grassroots conservative movement made dismantling the Department of Education a key priority, and this, along with attacks on public education and the Association itself, pushed the NEA to track and respond to those attacks.

Its forays into politics naturally put the Association on one side of the culture wars that came to America in the 1980s. One issue which NEA would clash with conservatives on was over the role that the federal government would play in funding and directing education policy in the USA. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act was passed, giving the federal government a direct role in K-12 education for the first time. Notably, NEA appears to have not publicly endorsed the law at the time. In contrast, when the American Defense Education Act was up for vote in 1983, they released a public endorsement of it and put the force of their political wing behind passing it.