



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”

www.wsascd.org

‘Critical Questions’ Series March 2009

What Steps Can Educators Take to Practice the Art of Advocacy?

Thomas “Tip” O’Neill, who served as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987, stated, “All politics is local.” The quote resonates in education, too, and underlies a personal motivation to get involved at a grass roots level of the politics that sets a great deal of our educational agenda. In fact, if all politics is local, as O’Neill suggests, it may be time that we ask ourselves why we aren’t more actively involved in its processes. Don’t we have a responsibility to be political advocates for our school communities? Strategic Plan Goal 4 Influence/Policy of the WSASCD encourages advocacy from its membership:

Anticipate issues and be proactive in shaping recommendations to improve education policy. Serve as a sought-after, reliable and informed source of accurate information regarding quality teaching and learning. Work and stand for what we believe in (WSASCD, 2009).

Becoming an effective advocate raises the question “What steps can educators take to become better practitioners in the art of advocacy?” The skills of a political education advocate are actually pretty familiar. Advocating to legislators is very similar, in fact, to the instruction we offer every day in our schools. As in instruction, in contemplating what steps to take in advocacy it is helpful to ask, “How is this best for kids?” With that overarching goal in mind, we offer the following simple but effective strategies in conversing with your legislators.

Foster Collaborative Relationships: Kouzes and Posner (1995) call for the promotion of cooperative solutions and the importance of building trusting relationship as effective strategies to achieve goals. Importantly, he notes that listening and appreciating the thoughts of others is needed to foster collaborative relationships. According to liaisons to our House and Senate members, legislators, faced with tough choices, value the opportunity to discuss important issues with constituents. Such discussions can guide their understanding of the critical needs of the people they represent, and help clarify their own perceptions of conflicting points of view. Congressional liaisons know that the relationships that enable such valuable discussions are not built in a day, but over time. Educators should keep that in mind, and, as advocates, invest time in communicating with legislators throughout the year, not just at moments of need. Through these relationships, educators can become trusted constituent voices to busy congressional liaisons.

Fostering these relationships means seeking opportunities to meet with legislators—for instance, when they are home on break. Consider sharing with them how classrooms and schools present learning environments that challenge, support and engage children. Even better, an invitation to visit your school can open the door to firsthand awareness of the effect of good legislative decisions and serve to remind them who these decisions are ultimately made for. Invitations like these can put a crucial personal face to school issues. (They also create local newspaper photo opportunities, which legislators appreciate.) Remember, too, that a collaborative relationship is a two way street. You should also expect your legislator to contact you with requests for information. When this happens, support the relationship you have built by making sure you respond in a timely fashion.

Implement Best Practices: Olzendam (Curriculum in Context, 2008) challenges us to implement best practices in the classroom. This recommendation should also be kept in mind in the role of educational advocate. Olzendam suggests, for instance, providing clear targets and use of common language as a way for educators to effectively deliver their message. In writing to legislative liaisons, this translates to limit issues, preferably to one per letter. Liaisons discourage the use of form letters. Like our students, legislators respond more favorably to personal presentations than to canned ones. Liaisons also suggest that personalized local impact stories play well. When advocating for schools, educators who put a face on students impacted by legislation build empathy for their cause, in the same way that a personal connection to a lesson helps students' understanding. Finally, follow up contacts are helpful. Too often, liaisons state, educators place a call and are not heard from again. Filling an advocacy role is a year-round responsibility. Checking for understanding is as important here as it is in the classroom.

Teach Your Legislators Well: A compilation of research published by the Center for Educational Effectiveness (2007) and the Washington State Leadership Academy (2009) highlighted in advocacy as well as in classrooms, the importance of high quality instruction tied to clear purpose and expectations. Educational advocates are encouraged to remember this. Legislators, inundated with a tremendous amount of information supporting or opposing positions, appreciate and value clear and concise delivery of information, to help them sort out key points. Focus tightly on how your position represents what is best for kids and how it can help student achievement. In addition, high quality instruction can help frame a legislator's understanding of key issues. When providing information, keep in mind that it is next to impossible for legislators to review all the material they receive. Thus, an important strategy in keeping legislators focused and aware of important issues is to keep the information clear and concise, both brief and to the point. Avoid huge packets of information; provide instead brief, bulleted and/or prioritized statements to support your position. In closing, engage your advocacy role, as you would in teaching, with a dose of compassion. Legislators are busy people who play a critical role in shaping our work. They have demands and conflicts that will cause them occasionally to take positions that are incongruent with yours. There will be times when a scheduled meeting may be cancelled. They may fail to understand the finer points of an issue. But don't let that discourage you from delivering your message. Offer to meet at a different time; offer to provide the information in a form that better meets their needs; resist the temptation to overwhelm your legislator with lots of "stuff" as a way of achieving your goals. Keep

your advocacy small, personal, and to the point, with clear data supporting your position. Invest the time to thank them for their service. And finally, keep in mind Tip O'Neill's notion that all politics is local. Legislators want to know what their constituents are thinking. It is up to you to tell them.

Want to know more about how to become an Educational Advocate? Check out http://www.ascd.org/public_policy.aspx

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