



Making Your Voice Heard

Lorraine D'Ambruoso contends that advocacy is the responsibility of every professional educator

Most language educators shudder at the thought of political advocacy. They believe that, first and foremost, they are teachers, and that since they are far too busy with the myriad of daily tasks required to be good teachers, politics should be left to the lobbyists. Yet I contend that advocacy is the responsibility of every professional educator.

One's approach to advocacy depends upon how one defines the term. First of all, we must make the distinction between lobbying and advocating. If one considers advocacy to be a process by which one expresses a viewpoint or pleads for a cause, and lobbying to be action which targets specific legislation

by activating a plan that monitoring — or advocacy — has shown to be necessary, then one can see that advocacy begins at home, as we all have causes and viewpoints that we wish our leaders and lawmakers to understand and support. When we advocate, we make these causes and viewpoints known. On the other side of the spectrum is lobbying, which is part of our political system, and quite different from “advocacy.” When we lobby, we attempt to influence the direction of our lawmakers, trying to influence them to legislate in ways that will support our professional goals and beliefs. In other words, advocacy, which informs, educates, clarifies, and expands pub-

lic thinking, is not radical or militant or aggressive but rather proactive, while lobbying, which attempts to influence legislation, is reactive. Not everyone can lobby — it is time-consuming and requires the kind of specialized expertise that the typical classroom teacher does not possess. But everyone can and should advocate.

I believe that there are two kinds of advocacy: individual and associative. We are all capable of individual advocacy while associative advocacy is the responsibility of the professional associations such as the California Language Teachers' Association (CLTA), National Association for Bilingual Education

(NABE), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and the Joint National Committee on Languages (JNCL) which is the language profession's official lobbying organization representing us in Washington. We need both kinds of advocacy, because we must continually inform educate, clarify, and expand public thinking about the importance of world languages and cultures education. I strongly believe that advocacy is a bona-fide role for language educators to play, and that we are the best prepared to play the role of advocates for what the community, the state, the nation, and the world desperately need in the way of linguistic and cultural competencies; what remains is the question: How do we go about preparing ourselves to play this role responsibly and effectively? But it is really not that difficult.

Individual advocacy begins locally—as the old adage states, think globally, and act locally. It has a broad and continuous mission, and functions in many arenas: school boards and administrative offices, local school districts, city councils, and local congressional district offices. We should begin by taking the opportunity, despite the already overwhelming demands on our time, to attend school site council and school board meetings, and to visit the local offices of our Congressional representatives. Our goal should be to make ourselves known as proactive educators before we need to request support of any kind. How?

- Attend school board meetings to highlight special programs at your school and stage successful student work;
- Invite administrators and legislators to events in your program;
- Focus their attention on your students' success stories and awards;
- Fight for retention and / or expansion of language programs;
- Send your students into the community to use their language abilities;
- Visit legislators' home offices to thank them for their work. But impress upon them that you are aware of both what they do and do not do and make them aware of your priorities;

■ Write to your legislators via snail-mail about an issue that concerns you. Politicians assert that every letter represents the voices of five voters! All of these activities are advocacy at the local level, and can be carried out by individuals.

In order to be effective advocates, we will sometimes need to move toward the associative arena, where we work with our professional associations. The California Language Teachers' Association became very much aware that foreign language was being left out of very important policy discussions and educational initiatives. At the same time, the Arts were getting lots of attention in the press, and at the policy table, and, equally important, in the State's budget for new programs and initiatives. What was even more disturbing for the members of CLTA, was the fact that California did not even have foreign language educational content standards.

In order to address this issue, the CLTA Board established an Advocacy Committee. The Committee's charge was to engage in the roles that I have just described — to develop a message and communicate it in Sacramento and in other important policy arenas, to monitor public and political action in order to weigh in on important legislation and to cultivate a relationship with sympathetic legislators who would sponsor legislation in support of language education, and to have an action plan or a strategy to insure the success of that sponsored legislation.

But we soon learned that even though we were all committed to do the best job possible on the Committee, we were out of our element. We knew all about foreign language education, but we did not know anything about "political or Sacramento speak" or even how to access those we needed to inform and educate. But I am pleased to report that, with the hiring of its Legislative Advocate, Kathryn Lynch, CLTA has been very active in the political arena.

In order to obtain content standards for our language programs, we developed our message on the importance of standards-based instruction. We communicated this to the California Department of Education. We

monitored their actions over a long period of time and finally realized that the CDE was not going to do this for our teachers. We determined that it was time to implement a plan of action. Kathryn Lynch found a sympathetic senator, one who realized the importance of languages and cultures as well as the need for standards-based instruction. State Senator Betty Karnette (D-Long Beach) was willing to carry a bill for that purpose. She sponsored Senate Bill 5, which was unanimously passed and became law.

Let us look at CLTA's efforts regarding alternative assessment for less-commonly taught languages. Teachers of Filipino in the San Diego area were concerned that their programs might be eliminated as a result of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requiring that teachers met specific criteria in order to be designated as "Highly Qualified."

When formulating an advocacy statement or agenda, we should not demand anything but rather aim to inform and build public and political good will for the specific agenda. By building public and political will, we will find allies that then may be willing to advocate on our behalf and take our message to policy makers that will address our concern.

The teachers in the area worked to develop a message which communicated the potential loss of Filipino language and culture programs throughout the state and especially in San Diego County, if the state did not adopt a means of alternative assessment for the Filipino language teachers, most of whom were credentialed, but in disciplines other than world language.

As this issue was discussed at length in the San Diego area, the teachers monitored the level of public support, which they deemed to be extremely high, but there was no way to resolve the issue at the local level. So, the members of the Foreign Language Council of San Diego (FLCSD) contacted their state organization, CLTA, asking for the association to help. CLTA entered into communication with the CTC (Commission on Teacher Credentialing), but the results were less than favorable. At this point, CLTA realized that it

needed to move from advocacy to lobbying.

We apprised Ms Lynch of the situation with the Filipino teachers. She was able to build on the good will of Assemblywoman Shirley Horton (San Diego) — which had been created by the focused message of the teachers' earliest efforts. Kathy worked with Horton and the result was the introduction and passage of a bill to save the Filipino language programs. Since then, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, (CTC) has developed 14 exams to certify teachers in languages such as Arabic, Armenian, Farsi, Filipino, Hindi, Hmong, Khmer, and Vietnamese.

This particular case shows the distinction between advocacy and lobbying, and the interrelation of the two activities — both of which are essential at the right time and place.

I would be remiss in an article on advocacy were I to omit the importance of ACTFL and JNCL. ACTFL developed the campaign for Congress' Year of Languages into the Discover

Languages, Discover the World campaign which will advocate for language and culture study over the next two years, and will, in November, select the third National Foreign Language Teacher of the Year, following on the heels of California and CLTA's own Christine Lanphere, this year's recipient of the award.

JNCL has its office in Washington, DC. Its executive director, J David Edwards, monitors any and all legislation that might affect our profession and our discipline. In May of each year, JNCL hosts representatives of all the language associations at its Delegate Assembly where we receive a briefing on the Hill, to let us know the direction of education funding in general and language education funding in particular. JNCL then arranges appointments for the delegates, giving them the opportunity to meet with their legislators to present their concerns and issues. This is one of the most valuable activities that CLTA funds.

We must remember that in this day and age,

“politics is indeed the art of the possible” and those who do not advocate for their beliefs and points of view— in both the public and policy arenas—are likely to be forgotten, and foreign language education is far too important to our world to be either neglected or forgotten.

So yes, most of us are not able or willing to lobby. Yes, advocacy is a struggle. Yes, it is work. But, that does not mean that we cannot influence the profession. In the words of Frederic Douglas, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” So please make it a part of your struggle and responsibilities as a language educator. Make your voice be heard.

We can all advocate for world languages and cultures. In short, language education needs advocates. Language Education needs voices. Language Education needs YOU. **X**

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