

EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP

Tools to Advocate for Your School

On-the-spot advocacy—the one-page fact sheet, the elevator talk, and to-the-point interview responses—is key to getting support for your school.

By Ronald Williamson and Barbara R. Blackburn

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School leaders are often in a position to advocate for their schools and for ways to improve the educational experience of students. By actively supporting a cause, such as increasing the rigor of your school, leaders provide information to stakeholder groups that will build support for their vision.

Successful advocates incorporate several behaviors into their work: They speak from the heart when telling their stories, and they are always factual, honest, clear, and concise. They frame the issue by tying it to a larger picture but are able to talk about the local impact and the implications for students in their own schools.

Successful advocates also possess important human relations skills. They are cheerfully persistent and aware of who their audiences are so that they can build advocacy efforts appropriately. Finally, they never forget to follow up and always thank people for their time and attention.

Advocates also develop strategies for getting their message to key constituent groups. They develop sound bites, identify success stories that can be shared, organize useful information, and practice “elevator” talks.

Advocacy Tools

To be a successful advocate, you must develop strategies to share your message and mobilize others to support your vision. There are three useful tools that can assist you in your advocacy efforts.

TOOL 1: THE ONE-PAGE FACT SHEET

Developing a one-page fact sheet is an essential part of your preparation. It helps you organize the important facts and points of your issue, can be

used as a handout to provide necessary background information, and will give you added confidence to discuss the issue. One page is your limit: most decisionmakers want the basic facts quickly, and the brevity helps you keep your message focused. Your fact sheet should:

- Clearly define the issue
- State your position on the issue
- Clarify what you want the decisionmaker to do
- Define five talking points in order of importance
- Provide two references to support the issue
- Make the sale with a closure statement.

TOOL 2: THE ELEVATOR TALK

On the occasions when you have a brief opportunity to make personal contact with a key decisionmaker, you should be prepared to tell a personal story about the importance of your issue—but remember that people quickly tire of detailed talk, particularly during a casual encounter. Such opportunities may occur anywhere, of course, but they get their name because they often last no longer than the time it takes an elevator to travel one or two floors—about 30 seconds.

An elevator talk includes three elements. First, you want to share who you are and what you do. Then you want to talk about your issue—for example, that you are working to increase the rigor in your school for all students. Finally, have one or two key facts that you want your listener to know or things you would like them to do. Don’t overwhelm the person with too much detail.

Practice telling your story and explaining why you care about the



The easiest way to connect quickly is to articulate problems they can identify with. The stated or implied payoff is the solution to those problems.

Assess Your Partnership and Advocacy Skills

You may find it helpful to assess your advocacy skills. Your response to this brief assessment will give you an idea about your strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Directions: Score your advocacy work by awarding 1–10 points for each of the following items.

(1 = This isn't happening at all, 10 = This is happening as well as I can imagine)

- _____ 1. My school has a written plan to partner with others.
- _____ 2. We partner with other schools and with agencies in education and related fields in support of our vision for greater rigor.
- _____ 3. We are open to building partnerships with other schools and groups.
- _____ 4. We build links on our Web site to the Web sites of our partners.
- _____ 5. We know how to communicate effectively with other groups.
- _____ 6. We understand the human relations skills necessary to work successfully with our partners.
- _____ 7. We understand the cultures that every school and organization brings to our partnership.
- _____ 8. We enjoy sharing successes with our partners.
- _____ 9. There is regular, routine communication among our local, district, and state partners.
- _____ 10. We understand the pitfalls of working with partners and have developed strategies for avoiding them.

Add up your points and use this key to evaluate your skills.

- | | |
|--------|---|
| 0–20 | Do you really want to be an advocate? |
| 21–40 | It's time to think about what you do. |
| 41–60 | You have a solid foundation for advocacy. |
| 61–80 | You know the meaning of empowerment. |
| 81–100 | You have an excellent plan for advocacy. |

issue with another person. This will build confidence for when you have a golden opportunity—a chance or planned meeting with a stakeholder or a mover and shaker.

Having an effective elevator talk is essential for networking, engaging partners, and opening new doors. First impressions are easily sabotaged with an elevator talk that’s unimpressive because it’s too long or too short.

The payoff for the listener—the “What’s in it for me?”—doesn’t always have to be explicitly stated. You have a maximum of 30 seconds to get potential partners to see that your issue is important to them. The easiest way to connect quickly is to articulate problems they can identify with. The stated or implied payoff is the solution to those problems.

TOOL 3: DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

At some point, you will likely be required to deal with the media, whether it is your local newspaper or some form of electronic media. Don’t be taken by surprise; anticipate that you will need to communicate with the media and plan appropriately.

You may also want to initiate contact with the media. They can be particularly helpful in sharing information about your school and your work to increase the rigor of the curriculum in your classrooms. Local newspapers are particularly helpful and will often appreciate receiving information about school programs.

When you talk to media representatives, keep these tips in mind:

- Preparation is your best friend—learn as much as you

can about the reporter, the medium, and the audience.

- Establish your communication goals for each interview.
- Determine two or three key points to make.
- Use memorable language.
- Learn and use the “bridging” technique: when the interview begins to digress, redirect it back to your key points.
- Practice, practice, practice. Practice on camera if possible.
- Choose clothing that will not distract from your message; avoid using mannerisms for the same reason.
- Forget jargon, now and forever.
- Ensure that your mind is in gear before your mouth travels.

- Look at the reporter when answering questions; turn to the camera when delivering a key point.
- Steady eyes suggest honesty; blinking, darting eyes suggest nervousness and dishonesty.
- Anticipate questions—try to figure out what the reporter might ask—and have answers ready.
- Relax.

Summary

School leaders find themselves working on complex issues in an increasingly complex environment. It is essential for them to recognize emerging issues and develop the skills to successfully advocate for their schools. **PL**

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