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## When Talking Makes a Difference: Teachers as Organizers

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Several years ago, frustrated by the way the rhetoric about education and schools continually seemed to miss the boat about real issues of literacy and children, I began to search for a better way for teachers to help the public understand what's truly at stake. Busy teachers, I know, who are immersed in the day-to-day life of the classroom have little time or energy to try to correct the many misconceptions that seem to float about schools, about education, about the teaching of reading and writing. But at the same time, it's clear that in order to expand the sometimes limited understanding of school life that is held by legislators, media, school boards and community members, teachers have to do something different. And we know how important this is: When those who are in power make decisions about the lives of students and teachers they don't understand, we who are in the midst of schools have an obligation to help them see literacy teaching in its complexity. Because if we don't do it, who will?

My search for a better way began with a simple question: How can we who are teachers of literacy change the way people think about schools, about language learning, about the teaching of writing, about what counts as literature? I soon realized what I was asking in essence was this: How does any group go about changing the public's mind? How do we effect a shift in perspective among those in our communities, our state, even our nation?

As I looked for answers I turned to the world of community organizing. The stories of community organizers and how they had changed public perceptions were compelling ones: from Candy Lightner who started Mothers Against Drunk Driving—a campaign that changed how the public

felt about drinking and driving—to Lois Gibbs whose work on toxic waste led to passage of Superfund legislation and the start of a new mindset about the environment and our role in it. One of my primary sources of information about how community organizing—how it worked, what strategies were most successful, how teachers might think about adapting strategies to their work—was, fortunately, very close to home: my husband Andy Buchsbaum. Andy has worked for the past 25 years as a consumer and environmental advocate, lawyer and organizer, organizing campaigns to lower mercury emissions, to clean up toxic waste sites, and to obtain funding for protecting the Great Lakes. He served as a vital resource as I wrote a book about my research, as he helped answer my questions and steered me to other people and resources on my journey to learn about community organizing.

Recently, I asked Andy to sit with me for a few hours to talk more about community organizing.

*Cathy: How would you define community organizing?*

**Andy:** There are several types of community organizing. The two most useful for teachers might be called advocacy organizing and community based organizing. In advocacy organizing you have a set of decision makers that you want to influence to do something and you run a campaign that helps them make the decision that you want. Often times advocacy based organizing is used for issues like gun control or motorcycle helmet laws or an environmental bond issue. Community-based organizing, on the other hand, is taking the pulse of the community, finding out what the people in it care about, and then doing something about that. This type of organizing builds the community. Sometimes, these two organizing types combine. If the pulse of the community is to take some action on an issue,

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then community-based organizing becomes advocacy organizing.

*Cathy: How do you see these two types relating to teachers and the kinds of challenges teachers are facing in the public rhetoric about education, things like NCLB, changing content standards, etc.?*

**Andy:** For those challenges, advocacy organizing is probably most important. There you've got people in power—school boards, state officials, national officials—who are making decisions that affect teachers' abilities to teach well. Sometimes those decisions are made poorly because of lack of information but often times they're made because of political or ideological reasons. So what that means is that simply explaining the issue on the merits may not be enough and if that's the case, then teachers need to be part of a set of advocacy campaigns. That's the heart of advocacy organizing—when discussion on the merits doesn't determine how the issue is resolved.

*Cathy: How does advocacy organizing work?*

**Andy:** The first thing is to figure out who the decision makers are you want to affect. By decision makers, I mean the people who can give you what you want or people whose decisions can make your lives miserable! For example for teachers, that might be a principal, school board members, state board of education members, or members of Congress. Next is to figure out who your friends are and who your opponents are. By friends I don't mean anybody who supports your position but those who can help you affect the decision maker. For teachers this could be yourselves, your fellow teachers, principals, school board members and then the most underrated ally you have—parents.

But you also have to know who your opponents are, who's working to influence the decision makers in a different direction. The most common organizing mistake is to confuse an opponent with a hostile decision maker. Decision makers can never be opponents because once they're opponents there's no way you can affect their viewpoint. They're already lost to you.

The next part of the campaign is to figure out

leverage points, that is leverage points that can sway decision makers to your point of view. These might be external events like school board elections or the release of a new education study or they might be campaign-generated events like a letter writing drive or turning out people to a PTO meeting.

The other critical piece is "cutting the message," which means figuring out how to talk about your issue in a way that's most persuasive to both the decision makers and the people who influence them. For example, do you talk about whole language or balanced literacy? Is the problem with NCLB that there isn't enough funding, or is it that the teaching concepts and practice it supports are not good for

many students? The important thing about cutting the message is that you can only have one message and that people have to be disciplined in using that single message.

So, for example, there might be 10 things wrong with NCLB, but you need to choose the one that

is most important for your decision maker as you go public in your campaign. So, it's important for your entire campaign—all your allies and everyone in the campaign—to be united in saying that one message. If you're not, you can actually weaken your campaign.

*Cathy: This isn't a typical role for teachers. How would you advise them to learn the skills needed for an advocacy approach? In other words, what should teachers do?*

**Andy:** Good teachers already know most of the organizing skills they'll need. They know how to talk to people, which is the number one skill. They know how to present before groups; they know how to write well; they know how to get their message across, to work collaboratively, and to take a plan and put it into action. So when teachers are faced with an

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advocacy situation, the first thing is to take a breath, take a step back, and plan their course of reaction before just reacting. This means finding a small group of other people who share their concerns and sitting down to map out some of these basic, common sense planning steps—who are the decision makers, the allies, the opponents; what are the leverage points; what’s the message—and then use the skills they already have to put the plan into action.

I think what’s hardest for teachers is to be a participant in a conflict situation—not trying to mediate it but trying to win something out of it. That’s hard for most people, but especially for teachers who are trained to resolve conflicts both in classrooms and with parents. The three things to remember that have helped me in conflict situations are (1) the issue is important enough that a little personal discomfort is worth it; (2) the conflict is not personal; and (3) you have plenty of people who support you.

*Cathy: Is there any role for community-based organizing for teachers?*

**Andy:** Absolutely. In fact, that’s what makes teachers organizing potentially so powerful. The key to organizing is mobilizing communities of people, and teachers are constantly building those communities. What teachers already do in their classrooms—building a community of learners, of students—easily translates into that community becoming mobilized around teachers’ issues of concern. Students are powerful spokespeople—and even more powerful are their parents. As good teachers expand their classroom community to include parents for good pedagogical reasons, those parents can become valuable allies in an advocacy campaign.

*Cathy: How hard is that to do if you’re dealing with an urgent issue like a sudden school board vote?*

**Andy:** It’s very hard to do if all you can do is react to a crisis. Reactive organizing is usually damage control. But if you organize proactively, that is you work on building communities of students and parents as a matter of course in your teaching, then you’ll be ready to go whenever there is a crisis that requires a reaction.

*Cathy: We hear about organizers using letter campaigns, petition drives and rallies? Do you think those tools are appropriate for teachers or do you have other suggestions?*

**Andy:** Those tools and many others—like news conferences, bringing media into your classroom, phone banks, going door-to-door are completely appropriate for teachers. But none of them will be particularly useful unless they’re part of a larger plan. Those tools are tactics, they’re not strategies. You need a strategy or your tactics won’t work.

Once you have a plan, the thing to remember is that all these tools are just different ways of talking to people. And talking to people is what’s most important. There’s actual community organizing research that shows that if you talk to 1/3 of a closed community, the other 2/3 will know what you said. We call this the “gossip factor.” And it’s far more powerful than newspaper stories or TV ads because people are getting the message from people they know, from their neighbors and friends. This kind of organizing is perfect for teachers who build defined communities in classrooms and schools and towns and cities.

*Cathy: Any last words of advice?*

**Andy:** Teachers can do this, too. You have so much power because of your sheer numbers and the way your work affects so many people. Take advantage of that power. You *can* do this.

As well-known organizers Lois Gibbs and Will Collette say, “Organizing is real complicated. First you talk to one person, then you talk to another person, then you talk to another person. . . .” (p.59).

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### About the Authors

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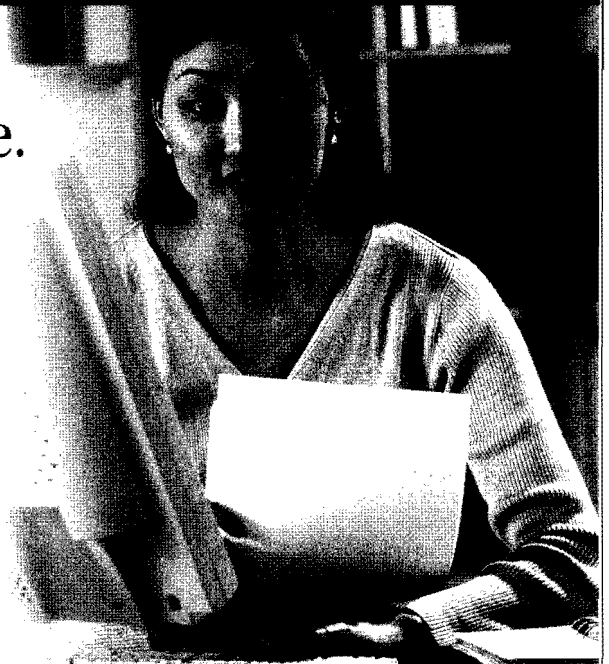
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