

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 33 | Issue 2

Article 4

5-2018

Everyday Advocacy as Part of Everyday Professionalism

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Recommended Citation

Fleischer, Cathy A.; Feliks, Alaina; Brooks-Yip, Melissa; and Andrew-Vaughan, Sarah (2018) "Everyday Advocacy as Part of Everyday Professionalism," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 33: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2176>

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Narrative

Everyday Advocacy as Part of Everyday Professionalism

CATHY FLEISCHER, SARAH ANDREW-VAUGHAN, MELISSA BROOKS-YIP, AND ALAINA FELIKS

In the last few weeks, we have been captivated by images of teacher activists—from teachers in Florida demanding legislative changes in gun control to educators in West Virginia taking to the picket line to force legislators to honor an agreement to increase wages (but only after packing and distributing lunches for their students who relied on school for food). Angered and frustrated by false promises and continued disrespect, these teachers made their voices heard, weaving in new story lines to the public narrative about teachers and teaching. These teachers, committed to kids, curriculum, and conditions that allow for positive and supportive learning, stepped up and stepped out.

Like you, we are awed by these and many more teachers, students, and other citizens who are speaking out in this time of crisis, using tactics like protests, marches, legislative testimony, letter and twitter campaigns, and other social media to make their case to both targeted audiences of decision-makers and the public at large. This kind of advocacy—tied largely to a moment of crisis—is vital in creating the kinds of changes we seek in society generally and in education specifically. Teachers who have raised their voices in reaction to these crises are quickly learning lessons of advocacy, responding to a felt need in a particular moment with passion and conviction.

What would happen, though, if we began to see advocacy as part of our professional identity, as an integral part of who we all are as teachers—not just in moments of crisis, but every day? What would our professional lives be like if we were as knowledgeable about how to speak to the public as we are about curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy? If we knew how to help others understand the issues that drive our teaching and our students' learning or how to create allies in our communities to help us create the changes in the educational landscape that we know are needed?

We see this kind of *everyday advocacy* as a movement by

teachers who commit to changing the public narrative surrounding education—beginning in our local contexts. We believe teachers can and will make a difference in the world of education (especially surrounding issues of literacy), and we are increasingly making this stance a part of our everyday teaching lives. For us, everyday advocacy is part and parcel of our professionalism as teachers.

Over the past several years, we, along with a number of teachers across the country, have participated in advocacy training led by Cathy through summer and school year workshops, at conferences, and through the Everyday Advocacy website (www.everydayadvocacy.org). In this brief space, we invite you to learn from some of the advocacy work we have produced from this training: about the *issues* that mattered most to us, about the *strategies* we devised to help others understand those issues, and about the *tactics* we pursued to help make change.

It's important to note that, like many community organizers and activists, we make a distinction between *strategy* and *tactics*. Strategy is the overall plan for how to tell a particular message to particular audiences in order to achieve desired results. Tactics are the specific actions we take to advocate to a particular audience for the changes we want (such as writing a blog post or calling a legislator), actions that may change depending on the audience we want to convince, the local context, our comfort level and time commitment. Why is this distinction important? Too often, people see advocacy as equivalent to tactics, but we want to suggest that when we focus solely on tactics, rather than seeing tactics as part of a bigger plan, we run the risk of misreading an audience or giving up when a single tactic doesn't achieve what we want. As you'll see in our stories that follow, we created a host of tactics, each directed toward different audiences, as part of our overall strategy.

At the center of this work, then, is our identification of “the issue that keeps us up at night,” an issue surrounding literacy that we want others to understand differently; learning more about that issue (through reading, our own teacher research, and talking with others); and creating an action plan to move forward. Often our action plans focus on ways to proactively lay the groundwork surrounding our issue as we seek allies in our work. We then devise an action plan that names the strategy we’ll use to create change, the tactics we’ll focus on, and the end result we’re seeking. While the plan grows and changes as we are immersed in the work, we have found that beginning with an action plan keeps us focused. [See appendix for the template of the Action Plan planning sheets we used.]

As you read our stories, we invite you to think about your own issue, your own classroom, and your own context. Specifically, we suggest you consider these questions:

- What’s the issue about literacy education that keeps you up at night?
- Who needs to understand the issue differently?
- Who might be allies in your journey?
- What would change on this issue look like if you were successful?

Alaina Feliks: Creating a buzz about reading

Alaina teaches high school English in the rural village of Stockbridge, Michigan. The issue that kept her up at night was how to change the conversation surrounding reading in her school and community, moving students (and some teachers) from viewing reading as a required necessity to recasting it as something enjoyable and exciting. Realizing that “creating a buzz” about reading required allies among her fellow teachers, administrators, and parents, she succinctly named her strategy in this way: *In order to create lifelong, engaged readers who have the literacy skills they need for college and workplace success, teachers, administrators, and parents need to work together to promote a vibrant and well-supported reading community in our school.*

Once she settled on the strategy, Alaina initiated a series of tactics to change “business as usual” surrounding reading in her school, focused on the multiple audiences whom she knew she needed as allies. For her colleague teachers, she employed tactics like these:

- Speaking at department meetings about the importance of reading;
- Sharing an infographic she had developed on reading (see Figure 1), suggesting her colleagues include it on their syllabi;
- Collaborating with a colleague to host a librarian from Capital Area District Library who signed students up for library cards;
- Working with her department on strategies to incorporate independent reading into the curriculum;
- Recruiting teachers to give video book talks to share with students and parents;
- Creating “What I’m Reading” signs for all teachers and staff to put on their doors, naming all the adults in the school as readers.

Realizing that she also had to create allies among administrators, she reached out to them and, with their help, to funding organizations. She began that outreach by using a standard practice of our advocacy training: writing and then delivering an elevator speech, a short summary of her issue and what this audience of administrators could do to help with the issue. In addition, she used the following tactics:

- Creating two GoFundMe pages, one that raised \$500 for books for the media center and the other that raised over \$1000 for books in her classroom;
- Applying for and receiving a grant from the area Educational Foundation to fund 50 books for each 7-12 English teacher’s classroom;
- Continuing to advocate for an adequate yearly budget for the school’s media center and for classroom libraries for each English teacher.

And to create even more allies in this work, Alaina has also reached out to parents and families, sharing with them her message of the importance of reading, educating them about why this is so, and enlisting their help in this work. The tactics she used for this audience included:

- Creating an infographic on the importance of reading, a website with links to book reviews and an Amazon wishlist for the school media center;
- Highlighting student reading goals and reading curriculum in regular parent newsletters.

Alaina reports that she has been surprised to see how even small actions have had ripple effects in her school community. Besides inspiring a growing community of young readers, she has also seen positive impacts with her colleagues.

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One teacher shared with Alaina that now that she has a classroom library, she is motivated to find ways to continue to add to it. Another colleague has been inspired by this work to initiate a faculty book club.

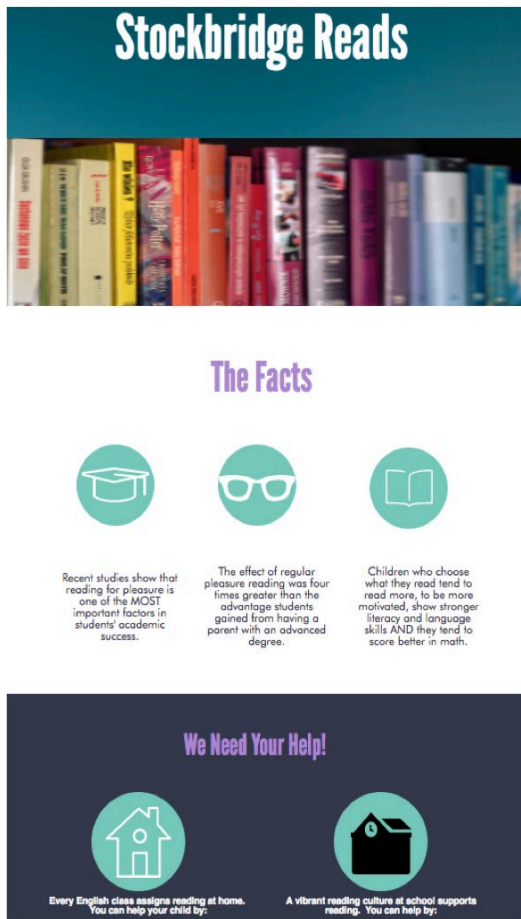


Figure 1: Alaina's Infographic

Melissa Brooks-Yip: Reimagining professional development as advocacy

As Coordinator of Instruction for Literacy for the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, Melissa has used advocacy as part of her mission to reimagine and restructure professional development opportunities for teachers—transitioning from more traditional one-shot PD days to sustained networks of teachers. In these networks, educational researchers and experts help teachers build knowledge in a learning environment that empowers and treats them both as professionals and researchers. The issue that keeps her up at night surrounds this work, specifically finding ways to better help teachers gain expertise for their teaching of literacy

and then know how to use that expertise to make changes in how literacy instruction is perceived by administrators and colleagues in their schools. For her advocacy project, she focused specifically on one of the networks she developed in 2012, the Study of Early Literacy (SOEL), considering how she might both empower teachers through this approach to learning and encourage them to help others understand the impact of this kind of work. As she explains in her strategy statement and advocacy goals:

Because teachers are continual learners, dedicated to perfecting their craft, we need to help stakeholders understand the robust professional learning experiences teachers participate in as part of their career.

Goals:

- To situate teachers in professional learning that helps them grow as good, effective teachers;
- To grow the mindset with all educators that teachers matter more than particular curriculum materials, pedagogical approaches, or “proven programs”;
- To invest in the development of effective teaching through the network model of professional development as a research-based strategy;
- To situate teachers in the center of their own learning.

Melissa focused year one of her advocacy project on growing the number of teachers in the network, supporting them to learn together about the most recent research in literacy instructional practices; helping them increase both their knowledge of early literacy and their confidence in talking about it to others; and encouraging them to engage others in their new learning. The tactics she used to achieve these goals included:

- Increasing teacher knowledge through professional book groups and interaction with guest researchers speaking from colleges of education;
- Increasing teacher knowledge through visits and learning walks in preK-3 classrooms to showcase best practices in literacy in SOEL teacher classrooms;
- Increasing teacher knowledge and confidence by immersing teachers in teacher action research: helping teachers learn how to investigate and solve their own problems of practice and recognize themselves as experts about teaching and learning
- Situating teachers to engage a chosen audience (fellow teachers, administrators, boards of education, parents and others), using their teacher action research to communicate their findings about ways to improve early literacy instruction.

In the five years since SOEL was developed, Melissa has seen teachers move from relying primarily on purchased curricular programs to recognizing their own expertise and confidence in their pedagogical content knowledge. Having tripled in size as it has moved into year six, the group is now looking to not only continue its study and learning of early literacy instruction and teacher action research, but become more intentional in its focus on literacy integration in the disciplines, arts integration into literacy, and teachers as writers. With a solid foundation in their content, and the network of SOEL, together these teachers are expanding their own knowledge as well as increasing others' ideas of what it means for children to be literate and what that instruction looks like in the classroom—moving away from the deficit models that too often divide classrooms and children.

Sarah Andrew-Vaughan: Encouraging real reading and writing

Sarah, the District Department Chair for English 6-12 in Ann Arbor, has been working much of her career on the issue that keeps her up at night: how to encourage *real* reading and writing in schools, replacing the *fake* reading and writing that too often characterizes classrooms and curriculum. As District Department Chair, she decided to focus her advocacy project on what she could do, through professional development, administrator education, and parent outreach, to raise awareness about the difference between real and fake reading and writing and to help reimagine literacy teaching that would support this shift.

Sarah named her strategy statement and goals in this way: *Because students deserve to have authentic reading and writing experiences, we need to help teachers, administrators, students and parents understand what works for growing real readers and writers.*

Goals:

- 1. Helping these groups understand the elements of real reading and writing: moving students toward independence; encouraging structures that support voice and choice, using models and modeling; and relying on formative assessment to guide teaching and learning;*
- 2. Creating PD for teachers that models these elements of real reading and writing and workshop;*
- 3. Creating materials and experiences for principals and parents that explain these elements.*

In order to work toward these goals, Sarah implemented a series of tactics directed toward teachers, administrators, and parents.

Beginning with the audience of teachers, Sarah focused on ways to make professional development sessions serve as models for what teachers could do in actual classrooms to support real reading and writing. Tactics she used included:

- Designing each PD session to include choice, differentiation, and modeling—the essential elements for authentic literacy;
- Reformatting PD evaluation as teacher self-evaluation, again modeling the kinds of evaluation that would help classroom reading and writing be more authentic;
- Adjusting PD based on formative assessment and teacher request—once more demonstrating for teachers how classroom practice can shift and change depending on student interest and needs;
- Working in small groups to align outcomes to units, focusing on skills and dispositions over content and titles and suggesting workshop approaches as a way to do this.

Recognizing the importance of support from principals in changing the conversation surrounding reading and writing, Sarah introduced some different tactics:

- Inviting principals to stop in to small group work days with teachers, so that they could see both the content of the PD work and what collaborative learning environments can achieve;
- Cc'ing principals on broadcast communications to teachers surrounding these issues, so that they were up-to-date on current research and practice surrounding authentic reading and writing.

As she worked to shift the way others understand new ways of thinking about reading and writing, Sarah also focused on the vital role parents and families might play in that shift. Tactics she's used to reach this group include:

- Collaborating with teachers to plan parent nights, so that parents could understand issues of reading and writing;
- Encouraging teachers to add reading/writing at home ideas to share with parents;
- Hosting a joint elementary-middle school Family Literacy Night during summer school.

And, finally, Sarah noted the support that community partners could develop in this area, and so worked to gain

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allies in the community by partnering with them. Tactics she used to reach this group included the following:

- Working with community partner organizations that provide support to area students: offering help with professional development, parent nights, identification of resources.

In addition, Sarah has been using her Twitter account to share articles and talk about teaching and learning. Lately, she reports an increase in the number of parents following her, adding to their knowledge of literacy and pedagogy. She's also been doing quite a bit of SAT prep—but with teachers and counselors, at community centers and family nights, sending the message that real reading and writing is the best test prep there is. (Sarah explains that she invites members of these to take slivers of the test, and, as she says, “this point practically makes itself.”) This “you can't beat 'em, so join 'em and influence the conversation” approach is how she describes her advocacy.

Everyday advocacy as part of the everyday teaching life

These educators, and many more who are introduced to advocacy approaches, find that over time this work becomes another part of their teaching lives, a habit of mind that infiltrates their approaches to being a teacher. They use advocacy tools to identify “the issue that keeps them up at night” that they want others to understand. They learn more about that issue through their own reading, teacher research, and discussions with others. They create an action plan that includes a strategy statement, a naming of the audiences they want to reach, and tactics appropriate for each audience. In short, they see themselves as everyday advocates and—most importantly— they recognize this naming as part of their professional identities.

Over the years, as Cathy has talked with many teachers who have been immersed in everyday advocacy training, she has heard them articulately explain how they turn to that training when they want to change the narrative surrounding their teaching, especially with parents, colleagues and administrators. Just last week, for example, she received a note from a teacher who had gone through advocacy training a few years ago, a note that began, “I ran into an...issue last week—and I used my Everyday Advocacy Skills to solve it.” The teacher went on to describe how she found allies, created a strategy, picked a tactic, and stayed focused on the issue. Even when faced with an administrator who “got furious, I stayed calm

and on topic.” “Knowing how to think this through,” she continued, “kept me calm and reduced stress—it was amazing.”

The bottom line is this: In order to change the current dismissive narrative about teachers and teaching, we as professionals have to raise our voices and find ways to share our expertise with others. When we find ways to do that consistently, thoughtfully, and strategically, we not only have an impact on specific issues, we begin to change the overall narrative about teacher expertise. Teacher voices are important ones, and we can, like the teachers profiled here, learn how to make our voices heard.

To learn more about Everyday Advocacy

- Everyday Advocacy website: <https://everydayadvocacy.org>.
- Fleischer, C., Daniel, E., Eddy, L., Gedeon, K., DeYoung Kander, J., Kangas, D., and Guinot Varty, N. (2014). Teacher researchers as local agents of change: exploding the myth of the bad teacher. *LAJM* 29 (2): 41- 46.
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Cathy Fleischer is a professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, where she teaches courses in writing and English, co-directs the Eastern Michigan Writing Project, and serves as Faculty Associate for the Office of Campus and Community Writing.

Alaina Feliks participated in Everyday Advocacy training facilitated by Cathy. She teaches in Stockbridge Community Schools.

Melissa Brooks-Yip is Coordinator of Instruction for the Washtenaw Intermediate School District; she participated in Everyday Advocacy training facilitated by Cathy.

Sarah Andrew-Vaughan is District English Department Chair for the Ann Arbor School District, and she also participated in Everyday Advocacy training facilitated by Cathy.

Appendix

Everyday Advocacy: Creating an Action Plan

Step 1: Background

The Concern:

- What is the big picture problem?

The Issue:

- How does that big picture problem relate to your own situation: naming a specific issue
- How is the issue situated in your own context?
- What about the issue is within your power to change?

The Frames:

- How is this issue framed in the current public consciousness?
- What kind of frame would better communicate your issue?

***Write your strategy in a one-sentence statement:
How to effectively tell X message to Y audience
to achieve Z result.**

Step 2: Strategy

Who is your audience?

- Who are the decision makers about your issue?
- Are those decision makers the main audience?
- Is there a secondary audience that would be important to reach?
- Who are your allies? Opponents? Undecideds?
- How will you shape your message to reach each group?

What is your message?

- How can you translate your issue into a statement that will move your audience to action?
- How can you cut or frame it to reach the people you need to reach?
- What is the context for your message?

What results do you hope for?

- What change are you seeking?
- What is the long-term goal?
- What are some immediate and short-term goals that will help you reach the long-term one?
- How will you know you're successful?
- What is your timeline?

Step 3: Tactics

- What actions will you take to create change surrounding your issue?
- What tactics make most sense in the short-term, intermediate, and long-term?
- What tactics fit for particular audiences? Are you seeking to inform, change minds, inspire someone to take action, or something else?