



8-1979

## Many Advocates . . . But Little Advocacy?

Burton M. Nygren

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nygren, Burton M. (1979) "Many Advocates . . . But Little Advocacy?," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol4/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [und.common@library.und.edu](mailto:und.common@library.und.edu).

## Many Advocates . . . But Little Advocacy?

Burton M. Nygren

Superintendent, Grand Forks Public Schools

The most serious problem in American public education is not inflation, desegregation, declining enrollments or even the tax revolt--although such issues are admittedly troublesome. The single greatest crisis is that the nation's students have lost their advocates.

Certainly, numerous organizations, agencies and individuals claim as a fundamental goal the advocacy of school children. A rash of clever slogans, beautifully phrased resolutions and remarkable activity at state and national conferences may strike some as evidence that elementary and secondary students have never been in better hands.

Is it possible we have little more than promises, promises, promises (typically sincere), but tangible results are minimal and ineffectual? And the support of public school youngsters continues to decline. Task forces, strategy sessions, expert papers and unending efforts to define problems are generated daily. But what has this to do with advocacy? To be an advocate is to actively support a cause and to literally plead in another's behalf. It means to identify so closely with the needs of someone, that failure in efforts to help is as much a defeat for the advocate as the recipient of the support. It means you get something done.

Let us examine several "advocates" who have historically been understood to be faultless in their commitment to youth. Search beyond the predictable, and superficial, lip-service level, however. What

these "advocates" preach is interesting, what they practice is crucial. Make your own judgments about these individuals and groups. Imagine a scale showing high to low advocacy. If your cumulative ratings reveal low advocacy (as mine do), public school children are the losers.

Parents - Are parents advocates for all children or a particular child--a son or daughter? When their child leaves a school, does the parent's interest and involvement remain high?

Teachers (N.E.A./A.F.T.) - As the organized teacher "education outrage machine" grinds out master contract language by the ream, have you observed the preponderance of clauses militantly demanding teacher rights? How does this number compare with those sections guaranteeing a quality education for students?

Principals (N.A.S.S.P./N.A.E.S.P.) - While claiming to be instructional leaders, these ex-teachers are organizing their own unions to secure various management rights and fringe benefits. In your community are principals perceived as champions of students' rights?

Superintendents (A.A.S.A.) - Attend the national convention of these key administrators and you'll be surprised how few sessions deal directly with the curriculum and youth. Clinics on how to negotiate a better board/superintendent contract are packed. Have you ever wondered why superintendents and school boards in community after community are spending so much energy fighting each other? The same amount of time devoted to students could produce some delightful results.

School Boards (N.S.B.A.) - Why do so many critics of public education seek to serve on school boards? Once elected, their hidden, narrowly conceived agenda items surface and the community is burdened with "public

servants" best characterized as mindless, witless and worthless. Are students well served when board members see their roles as a combination of cashier and ombudsman?

State Departments of Education - State officials travel to Washington while U.S.O.E. officials travel to state departments. Would you guess the schools of America look pretty good at 30,000 feet? As you watch state consultants, coordinators, directors and assistant consultants, coordinators and directors wallowing in indecision, you are reminded of an elephant becoming pregnant. Everything's done at a high level, with much commotion, and it takes 22 months for anything to happen!

State Legislatures - The property tax (originally collected to pay for streets and sewers) is inequitable, inadequate and even unconstitutional as the major source for funding public schools. Why do state legislators refuse to correct the deplorable mess? If it is true that governments usually find money for what is deemed important, then why is public education dangerously underfinanced?

U.S. Congress/White House - The cost overruns on a single nuclear powered aircraft carrier would fund remedial reading programs for years. Do the elected officials in Washington really believe every child should have the right to read?

U.S. Office of Education (H.E.W.) - Have we permitted local school districts to become an instrument for social and political manipulation dominated by federal bureaucracies? Federal agencies with overstuffed money bags seem to have forgotten that funds are best spent in classrooms. Do citizens in your community want the federal government to provide 2 percent aid and 98 percent control in educating the handicapped child? Someone has suggested an apt description of our federal education bureaucrats: "Think softly and carry a big staff."

Colleges of Education (Professors) - If you can't understand what school people are talking about, consider the major source of the problem. Where do you think most of our "research" and educationese originates? Students disenchanted with public schools and about to drop out are sick of experts designing studies to better understand the problems of youth.

The Courts (Attorneys) - The U.S. Supreme Court and Circuit Courts have become "super school boards" and function like a continuous constitutional convention. They may have entered the public school arena reluctantly, but is there a good reason they're now enthusiastically enjoying the management functions earlier the domain of school boards and administrators? Attorneys afflicted with "suing fever" are recognizing school systems as ripe for harvest. Will liability and malpractice settlements greatly enhance educational opportunity for students?

Are there other "advocates"? Of course, not to ignore students themselves. Feeble attempts like promoting causes in school newspapers or electing youth candidates to school boards surface here and there. But any significant accomplishments seem minimal. Indeed, some youngsters are hardly a positive force as they go about wrecking schools and the cost of vandalism now equals monies being spent on textbooks. Students can't save the schools. They don't own or operate them.

The advocacy crisis is an issue of American values. What we want, we will have. There is no shortage of advocates. If advocates begin practicing what they preach, the public schools will be saved and strengthened. The alternative is unthinkable. I believe our preaching days are about over.