

Using Strength in Numbers

How Do Politicians Make Decisions?

Many factors affect the decisions of politicians, not just whether an idea is good or just or correct or affordable. In order to get elected, politicians have to get votes in elections and money for campaigns. When making decisions, they may have their own opinions, but they also want to look good to people who support them.

In making a decision, politicians and the people they appoint to important government positions must weigh the following:

- Their own ideas and desires
- Number of letters and phone calls that they have received about an issue
- News coverage (including Letters to the Editor)
- The opinions of people who gave money to their campaign
- The opinions of the business community and people hired to promote their viewpoints (lobbyists)
- The opinions of voters, by polls and perception
- The opinions of organizations that represent big segments of voters
- The opinions of political party leaders
- People or groups who can make a policy-maker look bad



Adult learners in the MA State House during Adult Learner Awareness Day, 3-07.

What is Grassroots Advocacy?

Grassroots advocacy is when we use our strength in numbers to advocate for a cause. Grassroots leaders mobilize other people to advocate and put pressure on decision-makers. These volunteer leaders often develop ongoing relationships with officials and their staff. They discuss, explain, and negotiate issues with officials and follow up.

We Can Do Something

As students and as citizens, we can do something. If we just sit here and wait for someone else to do the work, it's not going to happen. We have to start, one by one, talking to people.



Maria Eugenia Carrasco is a former ESOL/GED student activist in the Coalition of Human Rights, Tucson, AZ. To learn more about adult learners advocating for change, go to <www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras> and watch "We Are Adult Education," a 14-minute video about students fighting for Adult Education in the Arizona state government.



Should We Call or Write to Officials?

- Personalized letters always matter much more than form letters. However, numbers still matter: thousands of post cards are better than five personalized letters.
- Calls and letters together are more powerful than letters alone. Almost anything draws more attention than a single email.
- It does not matter if you know every policy detail or statistic. Stories and experiences are also very valuable.
- Some adult education programs dedicate specific days to calling officials.
- More people will make calls when they can do so at the program with support from staff.
- You rarely get to talk to the politician. They hire aides who keep track of public opinion and tally the number of people motivated to make a call or send a letter or fax.

Why Should We Visit Officials?

- Legislators hear from lobbyists all the time but they rarely hear from ordinary people who live in their districts. Visiting is very important!



Adult learners in the Massachusetts State House during Adult Learner Awareness Day, March 2007.

- Politicians and their staff will usually be friendly even if they don't agree with you. They want to hear from people in their district and will often prioritize comments from people who are directly affected by the issue.

It's Too Late To Start Digging A Well When The House Is On Fire

Advice for Adult Education Advocacy

1. Timing is everything. Know the legislative calendar from January to June.
2. The campaign starts the day after the elections in November. Send letters of congratulations to the elected officials.
3. Identify your champions in the legislature and allies in the community to help you carry the message to legislators.
4. Focus on key decision-makers who make budget decisions on education: members of Education and Appropriations and Ways and Means committees.
5. Focus on the governor: in most states the appropriations process starts with the governor's budget submission to legislature.
6. Remember: student involvement is crucial.
7. Specify a number of letters rather than "lots of letters" to be sent to legislators. In small communities, ten letters can be a tidal wave.
8. List your Board of Directors on advocacy letters. Legislators may know some of them and take note.
9. Rule of four: There should be at least four contacts between the adult education program and state legislators during the year (congratulations letters, meetings, request for funding, end-of-the-year reports).

Art Ellison is the director of the NH Dept. of Education.

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How Should We Prepare for a Visit?

- Do your homework: Know which position the officials hold and how they have voted in the past. Find out which committees the official serves on and the purpose of those committees. Find out what experiences or interests the official has that you can relate to and bring up in the conversation.
- Bring packets of information that explain the issue you are advocating for, how many people you represent, and what you recommend. Also include background information on your organization or school.

What Should We Say in a Visit?

- Decide in advance who will say what. Practice what you will say.
- Anticipate the officials' questions and be prepared to answer them. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to say so.

Who is My Representative? How do I Find Out?

- ⇒ To find out who represents you in the U.S. House of Representatives, call (202) 224-3121 or visit <www.house.gov>. Input your zip code—it helps to have your 9-digit zip code, which you can find at <www.usps.gov>.
- ⇒ To find out who represents you in the U.S. Senate, call (202) 225-3121 or visit <www.senate.gov>.
- ⇒ To find out about your state representatives, visit <www.vote-smart.org>. You can also learn more about how to register in your state, recent key votes, and ballot measures.

- Be prepared to ask questions of the official and try to get specific answers.
- If the official disagrees with you, decide in advance what will be your response. Will you express disappointment or does it make more sense to leave a friendly impression?



Adult learner with her state representative.

An Agenda for Meeting with an Official:

- Establish clearly who you are and the group you represent.
- Review the information in the packets you brought and highlight some key points.
- Ask and answer questions.
- If possible, include a brief story that illustrates the need for the change you advocate.
- Discuss how you and the official will follow up.
- Thank the legislator for his/her time.
- Leave packets.
- Send a letter of thanks and any additional information the legislator requested.

How Can We Set Up the Visit?

- Call and make an appointment. Sometimes they will ask you to request a meeting in writing.
- Even if you don't get to meet with the legislator, their aides are important to meet with as well. They are responsible for advising the legislator.

Why Should we Invite Officials to Visit our Program?

- It is an opportunity for the legislator to meet people who benefit from your program. Special events, such as graduations and award ceremonies, are a great time for officials to see your program.
- A visit can be a great class project, where students write an invitation, prepare the agenda, and plan what to say and do. After the visit, they can evaluate what they thought of the official's responses, what they learned from the experience, and what next steps they might like to take.

What are Press Releases? How are They Used?

- A press release is written like a newspaper article: the most important facts go first.
- Quotes are crucial because they are the part that is the most likely to be used in a newspaper article. You may also include a "backgrounder" fact sheet that provides further information.
- Good press releases are sometimes printed as articles in newspapers.
- However, a press release alone will almost never bring out many or any reporters. It is merely an excuse to call reporters, assignment desks, columnists and editors.
- Over time, pay attention to which reporters have the most affinity with your issue and build relationships with them.

How Can We Talk Effectively with the Media?

- The same rules apply to talking with the media as visiting officials: educate yourself about the issue; speak from your direct experience to the point; plan who will say what; and rehearse your main "message of the day."
- If a reporter asks you an off-topic question, just state your "message of the day" again.

"Who am I to Talk to the Legislature...?"

As a new immigrant, I knew the importance of learning English, and Adult Education was the first place where I felt comfortable. Meeting people in a similar situations and having excellent teachers made my transition easier.

About a year later, I became a student council member. At this time we faced a new and unexpected challenge: A proposal in the state legislature to cut funding for Adult Education.

We were all concerned and asked, "What is going to happen to our school?" But we didn't stay with our arms crossed. We mobilized: Writing letters, organizing rallies, talking to legislators, and hosting the governor at one of our learning centers.

When I met with the state legislators, I thought, "Who am I to talk to people with high positions in the capitol?!" But I was very surprised and satisfied. This relationship between the legislature and the people is important. People vote, so legislators represent people. They work for the people.

In 2004 we faced a new concern: the President's proposal to eliminate adult education funding in the country. I traveled with other students to the Leadership Conference held by Voice of Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE) in Washington, D.C. We told the congresspeople and their staff our stories. We talked about the value of Adult Education.

Saving adult education means helping people get the knowledge and skills that they are going to use for the rest of their lives.

Ismet Osami was a student at the Refugee Ed. Project, Pima Community College Adult Ed., Tucson, AZ. Watch his digital story at <www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras>.



"Grassroots Advocacy" continued on next two pages



Public Action That Pressures Politicians

Politicians and people in power respond to pressure. If a grassroots movement is disrupting life-as-usual, they will pay attention. Explore actions that will get the media to pay attention to you and your issue, which will in turn get the attention of politicians.

- A rally, media event, or direct action should have a clear message.
- Legislators, union leaders, famous people as well as other well-spoken supporters of the issue should be asked to speak to draw press

What Else Can I Do?

I got involved in the "Student Presenter Project" because I was part of the student council at my school, and I felt bad that adult education was in danger of losing funding.

At the beginning of the fight for adult education funding, a lot of students at our school didn't want to get involved. They didn't have information. They didn't know what to fight for. There was a lot of confusion.

As student leaders, we wanted to make other students aware that it was not just about our school, but adult education in the whole state. We gathered information and we got trained on public speaking and on how the government works. Then we went to the classes to give presentations.

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I told them: "The government is thinking with their minds. We need to send letters from our hearts, so we

can reach their hearts and change their minds. Tell them your experience, so they can understand."

After the presentations, people got the idea of the problem. They asked: To whom should I send the letter? Is there a meeting I can attend? What else can I do?

Sandra Lopez was an ESOL student and volunteer at Pima Community College Adult Education, Tucson, AZ. Her digital story is available at <www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras>.



Sandra Lopez (middle) at a rally for adult education.

attention. Also, students and staff could share brief, well-crafted stories about how the issue affects their lives and community.

- The size of a rally is crucial. It should be held in an area that is large enough for a crowd but not so large that it makes the rally or event look small. If the turnout is small, support for the issue will be perceived to be weak.
- Something visual that dramatically makes your point can make a strong impression and draw media attention. In one adult education rally in Massachusetts, people rolled out a giant scroll down the state house steps that listed the names of thousands of adults on waiting lists for classes.
- Other ways to make the event newsworthy are a new study or report; anything that saves the public money; and controversy or conflict with people in power.
- Direct action is political engagement that demands immediate changes. This contrasts with indirect action, such as electing representatives who promise to make a change at a later date. Direct action can include activities such as demonstrations, boycotts, street theater, civil disobedience where a group might risk arrest. Some groups might use direct action if they feel they can't get an official's attention in any other way. For example, a group might stage a "sit in" at a legislator's office and refuse to leave until he/she agrees to meet with them. Grassroots groups carefully consider the possible consequences of direct action.

Adapted by Ami Magisos and Silja Kallenbach with permission from the Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education (PAACE), 2004; see <www.paacesite.org>.

Effective Advocacy Alerts on Listservs



The Massachusetts state appropriation for adult education has increased from \$4.2 M to \$29.5 M since 2000. Roberta Soolman attributes this to the highly organized and active advocacy efforts of the MA Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE). Each adult education program has a "point person," who reports advocacy efforts to a regional advocacy coordinator in each part of the state. One effective strategy to inform and activate this network is MCAE's use of its listserv. Some lessons learned about how to effectively use an advocacy listserv:

- Make advocacy alerts brief and concise. Before sending out an alert, examine it for any possible problems in interpretation of the message.
- Each alert must be understandable on its own, even if it is part of a larger campaign. Make it clear whether it calls for state or federal level advocacy.
- Rewrite alerts in simple language for students.
- Alerts should be numbered sequentially with the fiscal year.
- Eliminate jargon if you want more people to participate.
- Provide a script for calls and sample letters.

Roberta Soolman is co-chair of the Public Policy Committee of the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education.

What is Digital Storytelling?

Thousands of people are telling their stories in mini-movies that they create. These "Digital Stories" can be shared on the web or on CDs or DVDs. All you need is a digital camera, a microphone, and a computer with



easy editing software, like imovie or Windows Moviemaker. Articles in this issue with the video camera symbol have accompanying digital stories available on our website <www.nelrc.org/change-agent/extras>. For more information about digital storytelling, go to <www.storiesforchange.net>.