

Exploring the Connection between Advocacy and Persistence

by Ernest Best

Tell me about some of the recent advocacy work of MassAAL (Massachusetts Alliance for Adult Literacy).

A recent focus for us was Adult Literacy Awareness Day at the State House, which took place on March 22, 2007. We wanted to show elected officials that adult learners strongly support adult literacy. We understand that the field of adult literacy is in the “life-changing business.”

Adult Literacy Awareness Day turned out to be the largest adult literacy event ever in the state of Massachusetts. That event, along with follow-up work by MassAAL, its ally organizations, and other supporters, was successful in getting the legislature to unanimously approve a line-item increase in funding for adult education.

Why do you think you were successful?

MassAAL worked with MCAE (Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education) to develop trainings for adult learners so that students would be more effective in educating elected officials on the positive impact that adult literacy has had on their lives. We role-played how students would speak with their elected officials. We switched the roles around so that students played the part of legislators as well. People really relaxed and had fun with it. We held the trainings at the MCAE office, near the State House. After lunch, we walked across the street to the State House, and you should have seen the looks on the students’ faces. Many of them were in awe, particularly the immigrant students, because government buildings aren’t necessarily open to the public in many

of their countries. One student said, “If I was in a building like this in my country, it wouldn’t be for anything good.”

Why did you use part of the training time to visit the State House?

We wanted the students to feel comfortable and get familiar with the surroundings before the big

event. In the past, some programs have taken students to the State House without any preparation. We wanted the students’ visit to be an enjoyable and effective experience, so we thought the trainings were essential.

In familiarizing the students with the State House, Steve Hanley (WAITT House) and Kenny Tamarkin (MCAE),

two of the facilitators for the trainings, said, “This is your house. The people who work here at the State House are here to work for you. You are *their* bosses.” For a lot of people, this was their first experience in directly approaching an elected official. We made sure they had a chance to meet politicians and see that, yes, they’re human too!

In your experience, how does participating in advocacy work affect learners’ persistence in the classroom?

Advocacy work equips learners with lifelong skills. They can take these skills and use them to advocate for their neighborhoods, their kids’ schools, their workplace, and in their own adult education programs.

When students have a say in what happens in their program, they are more invested in it, more of their needs are met, and they stay in it longer.

If you want persistence, you have to give students a voice in their programs, input into their curriculum, an opportunity to advocate for their needs, and a chance to grow.

Training adult learners to be advocates creates a culture of student leadership and empowerment. When we do this, students articulate the kind of education they want, and they naturally stick with it longer. They have a stake in it.

MassAAL has been in existence for seven years now. We've visited and spoken with students in every part of the state and even in other parts of the country as well, and over those seven years one thing has remained consistent: more

than anything else, adult learners want to be respected and to be listened to. If you want persistence, you have to give students a voice in their programs, input into their curriculum, an opportunity to advocate for their needs, and a chance to grow.

Ernest Best, formerly an adult learner, is the director of MassAAL. Cynthia Peters, editor of The Change Agent, conducted this interview.

I Won't Quit

by Sandra Martineau

Tell us about your work with MassAAL.

It all started when I went to get my GED at the Methuen Adult Learning Center. I used to be a person who was afraid to talk to people. I was afraid to travel. Going to school helped me open up because I had to interact with the other students and the teacher. Also, I found new ways to be with my family. Now, I'm doing math with my grandchildren and reading with them. My daughters look at me and say, "Mom, we're so proud of you."

How did school help you deal with your fears?

The school asked me if I wanted to be on the student leadership council. This meant I had to get up in front of people. I started to open up even more. Then I joined the MassAAL advocacy training program. During Adult Literacy Awareness Day, I spoke in front of 1000 people at the State House. At first I was shaking and nervous. But then I realized they were people, just like me. Now, I'm on the board of MassAAL, and I travel to Boston regularly. I'm learning to train others in advocacy.

How has the political work affected your work as a student?

I'm still working on my GED. I won't quit. The political work taught me that change takes time. It also made me feel good about myself because I know I am helping others. I think having more students learn how to be advocates would really help students stay in class. It's taught me to never give up. If you're determined, no matter how hard it is, you can do it. Go for your goal!

Sandra Martineau lives in Methuen, MA. She has cared for others as a CNA for 39 years. "Now it's my turn," she says. She was interviewed by Cynthia Peters, editor of The Change Agent.



Sandra Martineau addresses adult learners at the Massachusetts Adult Literacy Awareness Day.