

Tools FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

THE POWER OF ONE

*What one person can do
to influence policy at all levels*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Several years ago, Dale Hair seized an opportunity to influence a state educational leader in Louisiana regarding professional development and learned the power of advocacy.

The event was a dinner at the Louisiana governor's mansion. Hair introduced herself to Paul Pastorek, then a member of the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and delivered a two-minute laser talk about the value of NSDC's Standards for Staff Development.

When Pastorek thanked her for her comments, she felt like she had been successful. At a statewide meeting the next day, she learned just how successful she had been.

Pastorek was the keynote speaker at the meeting. "He stood up and the words that I had said the day before were the words that came out of his mouth. I thought to myself, 'so this is advocacy,'" said Hair, then a staff developer in Louisiana.



Advocacy has increasingly become part of the work of educators, whether at the local level, in state capitals, or in Washington. At the local level, teachers, principals, and central office staff must make their case to school boards to support curricular programs and defend against budget cuts. Superintendents and school boards

often find themselves communicating with state legislators on school finance issues and policies

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What one person can do to influence policy

“It takes only one person to influence a decision. We can no longer sit by and expect someone else to advocate for high-quality professional learning and the policies and practices that will ensure high levels of achievement for all students. We all have an opportunity and an obligation to influence the professional learning that educators experience in our schools and districts.”

— Stephanie Hirsh,
NSDC executive
director

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affecting everything from classroom discipline to interpretation of statewide assessment results. And every educator wants to influence Congress on federal legislation, such as No Child Left Behind.

From her experience as a school board member and an active advocate for high-quality professional learning, NSDC Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh said the most important lesson she has learned is the “power of one.”

“It takes only one person to influence a decision. We can no longer sit by and expect someone else to advocate for high-quality professional learning and the policies and practices that will ensure high levels of achievement for all students. We all have an opportunity and an obligation to influence the professional learning that educators experience in our schools and districts,” she said.

This issue of *Tools for Schools* will explore some of the techniques that educators can use to influence policy makers at all levels of government.

SCHOOL BOARD

Relationships matter in dealing with school boards, said Kitty Blumsack, director of board development for the Maryland Association of Boards of Education and a former president of NSDC.

“You can’t have influence until you have a relationship. You can’t start a relationship by saying ‘here’s what I want,’” Blumsack said.

Begin now to think about how to develop a relationship with members of your school board before you are in a situation where you need to ask the board for something. Invite school board members to your school, to PTA/PTO meetings, and to observe classrooms. Invite board members to join a professional development opportunity or to sit in on a grade-level meeting. Attend school board meetings, even when topics being discussed don’t seem relevant to your issue.

E-mails and letters are less effective with school board members, she said. “They’re not going to answer anything in an e-mail because they don’t want to see it end up on the front

page of the local newspaper. So, if you want a response, having a conversation is a better choice,” she said.

If professional learning in your district is facing budget cuts, Blumsack counsels educators to lay out all of the options. “When you are confronted with cuts, don’t hold back. Be honest. Spell out all of the options and the ramifications of each. This is no time to be shy,” she said.

Educators who have done their homework in advance can experience the benefit at budget time, she said. “I’ve seen programs go down the drain because board members didn’t know the staff members who were advocating for them. And I’ve seen programs get passed because board members knew the staff members,” she said.

STATE POLICY MAKERS

As Dale Hair’s story demonstrates, educators need to be prepared to talk to legislators or state policy makers whenever the opportunity presents itself.

State legislators or members of the state’s board of education are less familiar with a school district than a school board member. But they are more likely to visit a school or district than a member of Congress. In addition, many state legislators have regular open houses or office hours where educators can drop in to have a conversation and leave a message. Be alert for situations where your state superintendent or member of the state board of education may be making a public appearance in your area, perhaps at a service club meeting or a public forum on education.

A well-prepared two-minute laser talk or elevator speech is the tool to use during a chance or a planned encounter with a state policy maker. Such short talks are intended to enable the speaker to deliver a compelling message in the time it would take to ride in an elevator from the bottom floor of a building to the top floor. See the instructions for a laser talk on Pages 4-5.

Hair had just seen a presentation about doing laser talks when she learned she would be attending the dinner at the governor’s mansion.

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What one person can do to influence policy

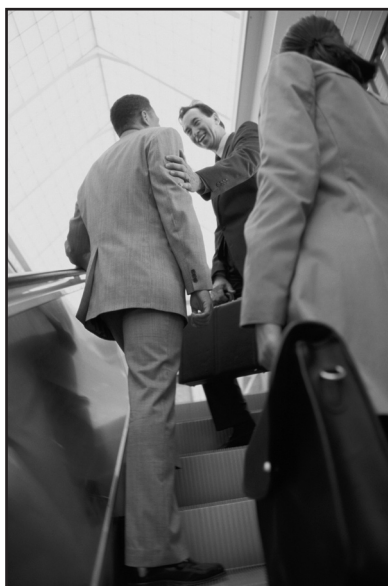
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The night before the dinner, she talked with a friend who was active in political issues.

Her friend asked her what she intended to accomplish. “When she said that, I realized I could actually accomplish something rather than just going around and saying ‘my name is Dale Hair and this is my job.’ That intentionality is something that you have to keep in the back of your mind. When intentionality and opportunity intersect, amazing things can happen,” she said.

Blumsack also encourages educators to develop relationships with state legislators or legislative staff members before there is a crisis. “If nothing else, visit their offices and interview them about their work, about the issues they think will be important during the next year. Then, tell them about something that you consider important. You’ve opened the door so that, when they want to know something about education, they will call you,” she said.

When legislation is being considered or pending, the best way to reach a state legislator is with an e-mail or a letter. Legislators count the number of individuals who have contacted them with a particular point of view, Blumsack said.



FEDERAL POLICY MAKERS

When it comes to influencing Congress, numbers count. “When it’s strategic, it’s really about counting numbers. They’re not reading every letter or e-mail, but they are counting how many letters come in, how many people are calling, and what they’re supporting,” said Rene Islas, NSDC’s policy consultant.

Islas has prepared a detailed advocacy toolkit that NSDC members can use to influence members of Congress to support legislation that reflects NSDC’s view of effective professional

learning including Senate Bill 1979 which refines the definition of professional learning in the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind.

High on the list of actions that NSDC members can take is calling or e-mailing a Congressional office. See Pages 6-7 for details about how to locate a number or e-mail address for your representatives in Washington.

Islas notes that voters are often put off when they call a Congressional office and end up speaking to an aide rather than their elected official. “It’s just as effective and often more effective to talk to the aide who’s responsible for the issue, particularly if the Congressman is on the committee because that staffer is responsible for developing the policy and for educating the senator or the Congressman about the issue,” Islas said.

“Connecting with the Congressman is never a bad thing but, when you get into the nuances of the legislation, you’re better off to talk to the legislative aide,” Islas said.

Islas also encourages NSDC members to be prepared to share professional learning success stories. In his work on NSDC’s federal policy agenda, Islas said he’s learned that “anecdotes drive policy making.”

For example, during a meeting with one influential congressman, Islas felt like he was losing the battle. As the meeting ended, Islas handed the congressman an issue of NSDC’s newsletter, *The Learning System*, which featured an article about the professional learning in schools in the congressman’s district. The next morning, the congressman called back and said he’d support S. 1979.

“They’re swayed by personal stories so talk about whatever you’re most passionate about. Talk about a personal experience with professional development that made a difference for you,” Islas said. ■

A well-prepared two-minute laser talk or elevator speech is the tool to use during a chance or a planned encounter with a state policy maker. Such short talks are intended to enable the speaker to deliver a compelling message in the time it would take to ride in an elevator from the bottom floor of a building to the top floor.

DELIVERING A LASER TALK

Learning how to speak powerfully about our issues is one of the most important tools in an advocate's toolkit. This format was created by Results, an organization devoted to eliminating world hunger, to enable its volunteers to create powerful "laser talks," short and compelling talks that are the backbone of their work. Laser talks can be used during chance encounters with policy makers at any level, during phone calls with legislators, and in meetings with newspaper editorial boards.

RESULTS created a simple acronym, EPIC, to help remember the basics of creating a laser talk. The letters in EPIC stand for Engage, stating the Problem, Inform about the solution and give the Call to action.

E = ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCE

Get your listener's attention with a dramatic fact or short statement. Keep this opening statement to one sentence if possible. For instance, you could say:

"I know you share my concern about improving the quality of teaching for all students."

P = STATE THE PROBLEM

Present causes of the problem you introduced in the first section. How widespread or serious is the problem?

"Too few students experience great teaching every day, too few educators experience professional learning that has a powerful impact on teaching and student performance, and too few schools prioritize high levels of learning every day for both adults and students."

I = INFORMING ABOUT SOLUTIONS

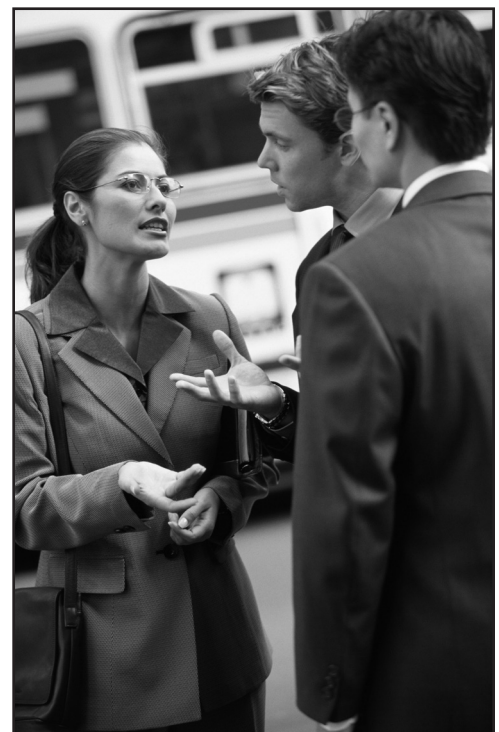
Inform the listener about a solution to the problem you just presented.

"We need to ensure that every teacher has access to high-quality professional learning every day so every student achieves. That can happen if Congress passes Senate Bill 1979 which includes a change in the definition of professional learning in No Child Left Behind. This improved definition would ensure that teachers have time to work and learn with colleagues every day, that their learning is aligned with standards, and that their learning is built on a continuous cycle of improvement."

C = CALL TO ACTION

Once you've engaged your listener, presented the problem, and told them about a solution, be specific about what you want them to do. This enables you to follow up to learn if they've taken this action. Present this action in the form of a yes or no question.

"Will you support Senate Bill 1979 which refines the definition of professional learning in No Child Left Behind? Would you become a co-sponsor for that legislation?"



10 WAYS TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

1. **Work** on their campaign.
2. **Make** a donation to their campaign.
3. **Send** notes of appreciation or leave a message of appreciation after they take action on legislation.
4. **Write** a letter to the editor acknowledging their contributions.
5. **Schedule** a visit between sessions to introduce yourself and offer your support.

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Delivering Your Laser Talk

Any good musician or actor knows you would never go on stage without rehearsing first, and it's no different with public speaking.

It's important to speak to the other person instead of reading the information word for word. You can, however, refer to notes at first. And you'll want to strive to keep the talks short — no more than two minutes. As you speak the information, you'll discover where you need more practice or where you may want to change a part of it. These talks will develop and change as you learn new information over time, so be flexible and stay alert for interesting facts to update your talks.



Tips for delivering a laser talk:

- Practice your laser talk several times before practicing in front of another person.
- Memorize as many of the details as possible.
- Choose a member in your group that you feel safe practicing with.
- Identify your audience — for example a member of Congress or a state legislator.
- Deliver your talk without stopping, even if you have a few stumbles along the way. The more you practice, the better you will get.
- Once finished, critique yourself. Pick two things that you liked about the talk and one thing you want to improve.
- Listen with an open mind and ear for learning how to make your talk better when your partner gives you feedback on your delivery.

Tips for listening to a laser talk:

- Ask the speaker to identify the target of this laser talk.
- Listen intently to the talk, trying to pick out different sections of the EPIC format.
- Did the speaker engage you up front?
- Did the speaker describe the problem and its solutions?
- Were you inspired by a clear call to action?
- Ask the speaker to critique his or her own talk.
- Tell the speaker two things that you really liked about the talk and one thing that you think he or she could improve upon.

Source: Used with permission of Results. www.results.org

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6. Invite them to your school to showcase the difference their legislation makes in the lives of educators and their students.

7. Find out who they listen to and strike up a relationship with those persons.

8. Attend community forums where they are speaking, ask questions, and spend time afterwards to thank them for their service.

9. Host a coffee in your home to allow friends and neighbors to meet the representative.

10. Suggest that others do all of the above as well.

CALL YOUR SENATOR OR REPRESENTATIVE

NSDC is trying to build support for passage of Senate Bill 1979 and encourages NSDC members and other educators to call your members of Congress and urge them to support S. 1979 and stress the importance of including it in the NCLB reauthorization.

Never contacted your members of Congress before? Don't worry, it's easy!

Visit www.house.gov, www.senate.gov, or call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask for your senator or representative.

When you're done, please let NSDC's policy consultant, Rene Islas, know that you've contacted the member of Congress so he can keep track of NSDC's contacts. E-mail him at rene.islas@nsdc.org.

Once you've discovered how easy it is to do this, encourage others to make their own phone calls.

WHEN CALLING

Your call will be answered by a receptionist. Ask to speak to the individual who handles education issues. Be prepared to leave a message. In your message, include why you are calling, your name, the name of your school/city/county, and your phone number. When you reach that individual, use the talking points below to promote changes to the definition of professional development in the NCLB reauthorization.

When you call, identify yourself:

- My name is (_____).
- I am a (teacher, professional development coach, professor, principal, superintendent, etc.) at (local school name, school district name, etc.).
- I would like to talk with the staff person who deals with educational issues regarding the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind.

Be prepared to leave a message:

- My name is (_____).
- I am a (teacher, professional development coach, professor, principal, superintendent, etc.) at (local school name, school district name, etc.). My phone number is _____.
- Leave a message that incorporates the following points:
 - ▷ I am calling to encourage you to support S. 1979 which was introduced by Senator Reed on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee.
 - ▷ The legislation amends No Child Left Behind and makes critical improvements to the current definition of professional development.
 - ▷ The improved definition of professional development ensures that:
 - Educators engage in team-based professional development practices during the workday,
 - Focuses professional learning on needs identified by data analysis, and
 - Includes a system of accountability to ensure the professional learning improves teacher performance and student achievement.
 - ▷ This legislation, particularly the improved definition of professional development, has the power to improve teacher effectiveness, increase teacher retention, and dramatically improve student achievement.
 - ▷ We need your support in the (House, Senate). Please consider co-sponsoring this legislation.
- Thank the staff person for his or her time.

WRITE TO YOUR SENATOR OR REPRESENTATIVE

Write to your senator or representative and urge him or her to support S. 1979 and stress how important it is that it be included in the NCLB reauthorization.

WHEN WRITING

Use the talking points to craft a brief letter (no more than a page) to your member of Congress and be sure to add a personal anecdote that highlights the impact of effective professional learning. **You can fax or e-mail your letter, but do not send by regular mail. Given security precautions in Washington, your letter may not be opened for weeks or months.**

The easiest way to e-mail your member of Congress is to go to his or her web page and fill out a “web form,” which you can easily find by visiting www.house.gov or www.senate.gov.

You can also use Congress.org to e-mail your member of Congress. To do so, visit www.congress.org/congressorg/home/ and:

- Input your ZIP code in the box to the left
- Select your member of Congress to contact
- Click on his or her e-mail
- Scroll to the bottom of the list and select “Compose Your Own Letter”
- Fill in the form and when complete hit “Send Message”

SAMPLE LETTER

Dear (name),

I am writing to encourage you to support Senate Bill 1979 which I believe will substantially improve the quality of teaching and leadership in American schools.

Reforming schools is challenging. Multiple innovations directed at the district, the curriculum, the test, the length of the school year, the community, etc., can make a difference. What makes the greatest difference, however, is the quality of teaching in classrooms.

Senators Reed, Obama, Brown, and Murray understand the importance of high-impact professional development and deserve support for introducing *School Improvement through Teacher Quality Act of 2007* (S. 1979). The legislation makes key changes to NCLB in support of effective professional development and recognizes that quality teaching occurs when teachers and principals engage in daily, collaborative, rigorous, professional learning focused on the learning needs of students in their classrooms and schools as a part of their work day.

Under this legislation, educators will have time to learn and work together to deepen content knowledge, plan instruction, examine student work, address different student learning needs, clarify student learning outcomes, and use the results of frequent classroom assessments to modify instruction. Second, it will foster collective responsibility among educators for student and teacher success creating a perfect recipe for improved school performance.

(Add a paragraph here about the difference that quality professional development has made in your own school or district.)

Thank you in advance for supporting this work. I would be pleased to talk with you at any time to tell you more about the difference that S. 1979 would make in my (school or district).

Sincerely,

When you’re done, please let NSDC’s policy consultant, Rene Islas, know that you’ve contacted the member of Congress so he can keep track of NSDC’s contacts. E-mail him at rene.islas@nsdc.org.

The text of this letter is available on NSDC’s web site at: www.nsdc.org/connect/legislativeupdate.cfm

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NSDC STAFF

Executive director

Stephanie Hirsh

Deputy executive director

Joellen Killion

Director of business services

Leslie Miller

Director of communications

Joan Richardson

Director of learning

Cathy Owens

Distinguished senior fellow

Hayes Mizell

Emeritus executive director

Dennis Sparks

Editor

Joan Richardson

Designer

Sue Chevalier

BUSINESS OFFICE

5995 Fairfield Road, #4

Oxford OH 45056

513-523-6029

800-727-7288

Fax: 513-523-0638

NSDCoffice@nsdc.org

www.nsdc.org

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2. Apply for the **NSDC Academy**. Learn more at www.nsdc.org/connect/academy.cfm
3. Sponsor and host a **custom-designed NSDC workshop** for your school system, region, etc. Learn more at www.nsdc.org/connect/customdesigned.cfm
4. Join your **state, regional, or provincial affiliate** and join one of its committees. Learn more at www.nsdc.org/connect/about/affiliates.cfm
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6. Write **an article for JSD**. Learn more at www.nsdc.org/jsd/themes.cfm
7. Volunteer to **serve as a session facilitator** at the summer or annual conference. Send your name to Cathy Owens, cathy.owens@nsdc.org
8. Nominate **a person or a book for an NSDC award**. Learn more at www.nsdc.org/connect/awards.cfm
9. Invite someone else to **join NSDC**. Learn more at www.nsdc.org/connect/membership.cfm
10. Write a **letter about professional learning** to a school board member, a state legislator, or your representative in Washington. See the Feb/March 2008 issue of *Tools for Schools* to learn more.

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Member Services

5995 Fairfield Road, #4

Oxford, OH 45056

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