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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

# Standing up, speaking out

TEACHER VOICES LIFT TO INFLUENCE NATIONAL POLICY

By Anthony Armstrong

**M**arie Parker-McElroy, an instructional coach for two Fairfax County (Va.) elementary schools, waited in a small room for her turn to testify at a senate hearing on how to best support teachers and leaders in schools. Looking around the waiting room, Parker-McElroy counted one university president, a state-level associate commissioner of teacher education, a university dean, a professor, a senior fellow, two superintendents, and two corporate presidents. It was then that she realized she was the only person on the panel who actually worked inside a school.



Marie Parker-McElroy

“I was excited and honored to have the opportunity to testify,” said Parker-McElroy, who had spent numerous hours perfecting her three-minute speech to the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee. “I remember sitting in front of the senate committee and thinking, ‘This is your chance, Marie, to make a difference.’”

What brought this unlikely Mrs. Smith to Washington? Parker-McElroy first considered the possibility of advocating for teacher professional development as a member of Learning Forward’s Academy (then the NSDC Academy). During her Academy experience, Parker-McElroy learned to articulate her beliefs about

professional development in a concise statement, commonly referred to as an elevator speech, in case the opportunity arose to speak with someone of influence.

When the senate committee began searching for people who actually worked within a school, Parker-McElroy was recommended as someone who knew the importance of effective professional development and its role in supporting teachers and students. “I received a letter in my e-mail from a congressman asking me to testify at the hearing,” she remembered. “I thought it was spam and deleted it.”

Fortunately, Parker-McElroy later learned the message was not a hoax and that she was, in fact, being asked to testify in Washington, D.C. on the importance of professional development. “I was honored at the thought that they actually wanted to hear what I had to say.”



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## YOUR EVIDENCE

When you have research evidence to present to policy makers, keep in mind that they most want evidence that:

- Considers the impact on entire systems;
- Offers sustainable strategies; and
- Takes local political environments into account.

**Source:** Nelson, S.R., Leffler, J.C., & Hansen, B.A. (2009). *Toward a research agenda for understanding and improving the use of research evidence*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Available at [nwrel.org/researchuse/report.pdf](http://nwrel.org/researchuse/report.pdf)

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## THE NEED FOR TEACHER VOICES

“It is critical that teachers make their voices heard because that is what the public wants,” said M. René Islas, policy advisor for Learning Forward. “Several surveys have asked the public who should be in charge of education decisions, and the results show that the public most trusts teachers to make decisions about teaching and learning in schools.”



**M. René Islas**

The need for teachers across the nation to make their voices heard to affect changes in policy is stronger than ever. *Advancing High-Quality Professional Learning Through Collective Bargaining and State Policy* (AFT, CCSSO, NEA, & NSDC, 2010) found that when professional learning is part of government policies or collective bargaining language, more effective professional learning is a result. However, not all policies have such language in place.

## START LOCAL AND WORK YOUR WAY UP

According to Islas, affecting national change can start

## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE WEBINAR NOV. 17

Review Learning Forward’s legislative efforts over the past year and look ahead to federal and state issues that will affect educators in 2011 and beyond. Discuss Learning Forward’s efforts to get its definition of professional development included in the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and what you can do to support those efforts at home and in Washington.

**TIME:** Nov. 17, 1 p.m. Eastern

**FACILITATOR:** Policy advisor M. René Islas

**PRICE:** \$39 for members; \$79 for non-members

locally, including determining how national policies are interpreted. “Even federal policies leave a lot for states and districts to interpret, offering local teachers an opportunity to shape how national policies will be implemented.”

Teachers and teacher leaders should also actively look for opportunities to talk to their national legislators. “Congressional representatives are willing to listen and are open to their constituents,” said Islas. “Find out where they stand, write a letter, send them a message through [congress.org](http://congress.org), or go directly to their web sites to send a message. They are always looking for ways to connect with constituents.”

## TAILOR YOUR MESSAGE TO YOUR AUDIENCE

The first step in crafting an effective advocacy message is to know your subject matter, and know it well. You don’t want to advocate for a concept that is considered outdated or has been shelved in lieu of newer discoveries. “Understand what’s going on at the policy level,” said Islas, who encourages teachers to avoid getting mired in debate and instead to look for the deeper needs that motivate the different sides of a conversation.

Once you understand the contextual landscape, determine what you want to say and how you can say it in a way that will address the concerns of your audience. Look for the most powerful and concise argument you can make. Craft arguments that you can easily deliver in brief encounters with colleagues, school leaders and administrators, and policy leaders.

According to Islas, policymakers are looking for ways to make a direct impact on student achievement and are not looking for long-term processes. This means that you will want to make clear and direct connections between the investments you are advocating and improved student learning.

Thanks to the 2007 report, *How the World’s Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* (McKinsey & Company), said Islas, policy makers are also looking beyond U.S. borders for possible innovations and effective educational strategies. Savvy educators can take advantage of this trend and search for international examples that have potential for local applications.

## HAVE A CLEAR GOAL

“Someone asked me what I wanted to accomplish,” remembered Parker-McElroy about her preparation for the hearing, “and I realized that I had the power to create some sort of change with my testimony. That was a profound moment for me.”

A serious challenge lay before Parker-McElroy. She only had three minutes to convey the importance of ongo-

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ing, weekly teacher collaboration and the complex requirements for effective professional development. Additionally, she knew that the committee would be hearing from many other speakers. She had to craft a message that the committee would remember when the hearing was over and they discussed the issue behind closed doors.

Parker-McElroy engaged in a great deal of reflection about the goal she wanted to achieve and how to achieve it. “I had to teach them about the issue within three minutes. I wanted them to remember why I was so passionate.” Ultimately, she chose to use an analogy to convey her message. Surgeons do not perform a surgery alone, she explained. Like a teacher, a surgeon has a complex team of people and systems that offer support, training, and assistance behind the scenes. “It was a hard decision to use the analogy at first,” she explained. “I didn’t want to take attention away from the main idea, but I needed to explain a complex idea in a short amount of time.”

As you consider how you will craft your advocacy message, avoid the mistake of relying too much on research.

### Learning Forward BELIEF

Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

How you say it is just as important as what you say. Recent research has suggested that simply offering research evidence to policy makers may not be as effective as some would hope (Nelson, Leffler, & Hansen,

2009). While policy makers cited research evidence as a key factor in making decisions, they saw limitations in research evidence and relied more heavily on other sources for their information, such as personal communications, the experiences of others, professional organizations and trusted individuals. This means that a strong, memorable advocacy statement conveyed in a personal communication has the potential to make a bigger impact than the most rigorous research.

The biggest challenge that Parker-McElroy sees in crafting a strong elevator speech is finding enough time to thoroughly research, reflect, and revise.

### REMEMBER E-P-I-C

Use the simple acronym, EPIC, to help remember the basics of creating your elevator talk: **ENGAGE**, state 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.

#### P = STATE THE PROBLEM

Present the problem you introduced in the first section.

#### I = INFORM ABOUT SOLUTIONS

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

#### C = CALL TO ACTION

Once you have engaged your listener, presented the problem, and told them about your solution, be specific about what you want them to do. This enables you to follow up to learn if they have taken this action. Present this action in the form of a yes or no question, such as, “Will you support changes during the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), so that its definition of professional development reflects these research-based successful practices?”

**Source:** [www.results.org/skills\\_center/for\\_new\\_activists/empower\\_yourself\\_activist\\_milestone\\_2/](http://www.results.org/skills_center/for_new_activists/empower_yourself_activist_milestone_2/)

“Once you have your speech ready, you have the words and voice to make a difference. You have something in your tool box that you can pull out to turn an opportune encounter into a teachable moment.”

### STAND UP, SPEAK OUT

Once you have crafted your advocacy message, turn your attention to boosting your confidence in the delivery. “Don’t be afraid to talk to people,” said Islas. “Remember that policy leaders at all levels really do want to hear from those engaged in teaching and learning, who can bring a fair perspective with the knowledge of what happens at the school level.”

“It is extremely important for teachers to speak out,” offered Parker-McElroy. “Policy makers are not hearing

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### EDUCATION ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Discover helpful tools and advice for how you can affect policy change with Learning Forward’s Education Advocacy Toolkit (2008). This 24-page guide includes tools and advice about whom you should contact, what your message should be, and how to deliver the message. Available at [www.learningforward.org/standfor/advocacytoolkit.pdf](http://www.learningforward.org/standfor/advocacytoolkit.pdf)





**WATCH** Marie Parker-McElroy's testimony to the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee at [www.youtube.com/user/learningforward?feature=mhum#p/f/0/Nmd0IMpOXbM](http://www.youtube.com/user/learningforward?feature=mhum#p/f/0/Nmd0IMpOXbM)

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from us, the teachers, and they want to hear from us. They want to know what we think because they don't hear from us enough. They hear from superintendents and college professors, but not from practitioners. They want to know what we think and what they can do to make a difference in the classroom."

While you may not be asked to testify in front of a senate hearing yet, you can still reflect upon your goals, craft your message, and use your voice to find out what kind of difference your conversations can make. Why not start one now?

**REFERENCES**


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*initial review and recommendations to support student learning.* Available at [www.learningforward.org/news/advancinghighqualityprofessionallearning.pdf](http://www.learningforward.org/news/advancinghighqualityprofessionallearning.pdf)

**McKinsey & Company (2007, September).** *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top.* Available at [www.mckinsey.com/App\\_Media/Reports/SSO/Worlds\\_School\\_Systems\\_Final.pdf](http://www.mckinsey.com/App_Media/Reports/SSO/Worlds_School_Systems_Final.pdf)

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*Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is publications editor at Learning Forward.* 

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**BUSINESS OFFICE**

504 S. Locust St.  
Oxford OH 45056  
513-523-6029  
800-727-7288  
Fax: 513-523-0638  
[office@learningforward.org](mailto:office@learningforward.org)  
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**“THE POWER OF ONE” AND RELATED TOOLS***Tools for Schools, February/March 2008.*

This newsletter illustrates techniques that educators can use to influence policy makers at all levels of government, including tips and illustrations for developing and delivering your elevator speech, leaving voice mail messages, and writing letters.

[www.learningforward.org/news/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=226](http://www.learningforward.org/news/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=226)

**FIERCE CONVERSATIONS — ACHIEVING SUCCESS AT WORK AND IN LIFE, ONE CONVERSATION AT A TIME***Berkley Books, 2004.*

Author Susan Scott argues that life’s failures and successes happen “one conversation at a time.” The book walks readers through her steps to build more effective conversations.

[www.amazon.com/Fierce-Conversations-Achieving-Success-Conversation/dp/0670031240](http://www.amazon.com/Fierce-Conversations-Achieving-Success-Conversation/dp/0670031240)

Find *JSD* columns from Scott on this topic at [www.learningforward.org/news/authors/scott.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/news/authors/scott.cfm)

**“TARNISHED BRAND COULD USE POLISH: A MORE VOCAL ADVOCACY ON SEVERAL FRONTS CAN RESTORE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING’S IMAGE”***JSD, Spring 2002.*

This article by Hayes Mizell looks at professional learning’s brand and suggests that teacher advocacy can help reshape the public’s traditional and often tainted image of staff development into one representing more effective professional development that is proven to work.

[www.learningforward.org/news/getDocument.cfm?articleID=1831](http://www.learningforward.org/news/getDocument.cfm?articleID=1831)

**TEACHERS’ VOICES***Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2008*

The Center For Strengthening the Teaching Profession conducts annual writing workshops to help teachers develop their voice for improving the profession through advocacy. Use their Teachers’ Voices publications to help build your voice. Read the stories from their teacher advocates, wait a day or so, and think about which ones you remember most. What specifically do you remember? What struck you as most memorable? Go back and read how the piece was written and look for clues as to why you remembered it so well. Look at the ones you didn’t remember and try to discern the difference. How can they help you develop your voice?

[www.cstp-wa.org/teacher-development/writing](http://www.cstp-wa.org/teacher-development/writing)

**Add your voice to these important projects****C2i: THE CHALLENGE TO INNOVATE**

The NEA Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education are inviting all public school educators to identify and solve education’s most pressing classroom problems. The best will receive awards and may be selected for further development.

Post your most pressing classroom problems and your proposed solutions. Up to five problems will be awarded \$1,000 for their classrooms and up to 10 solutions will receive a \$2,500 award for their classrooms. Only public school educators are eligible, but anyone can vote.

<https://innovation.ed.gov/challenges/challengetoinnovate/show>

**DESIGN A BETTER CLASSROOM**

*Slate* magazine is asking its readers to design a better classroom, one suited to the way children should be taught. They are looking for innovative entries, and Coca-Cola may build the winning classroom.

[www.slate.com/id/2269307/](http://www.slate.com/id/2269307/)

**LEARN MORE**

Find additional resources about raising your voice as a teacher leader.