

THE POWER OF ONE, REVISITED

Inspiring examples remind us we can all find ways to make a difference

By Stephanie Hirsh

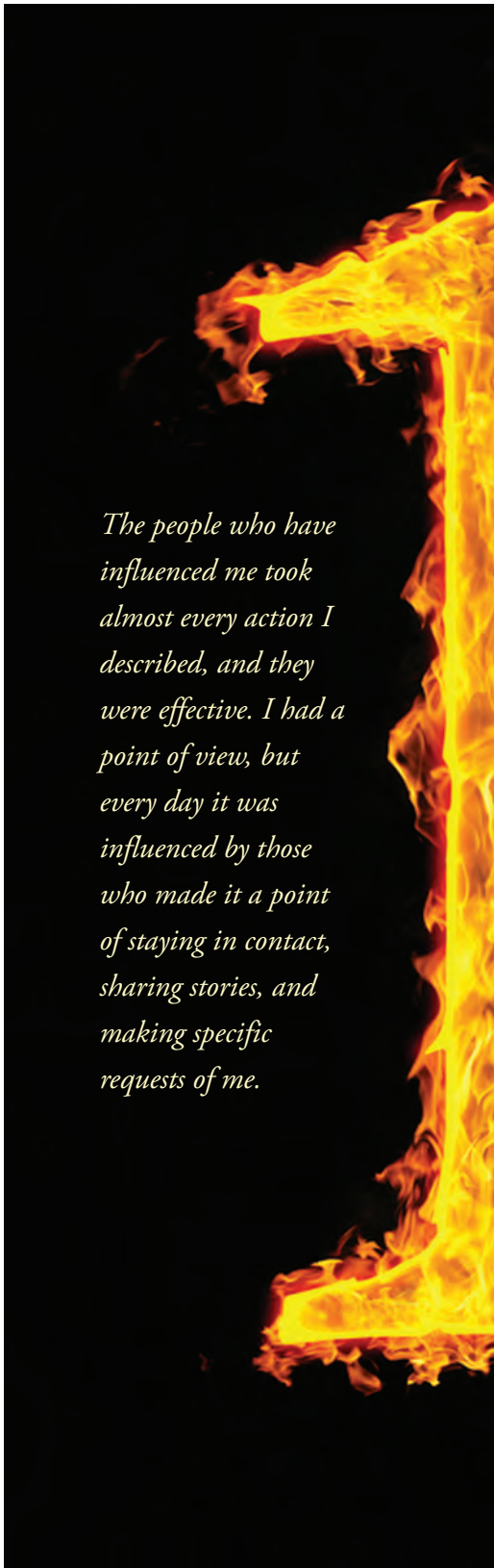
More than 10 years ago, I wrote my first version of “The Power of One” for *JSD*. I described my personal journey of discovering how one person could make a huge difference in the face of what appeared as insurmountable challenges. I described ways in which I had made such a difference and told, through the lens of a school board member, the ways I saw community and education leaders make differences as well.

People told me that the article inspired them to take actions they had never before considered. Many shared their personal success stories. Yet I am concerned that there are still too many people offering excuses rather than solutions for transforming professional learning to improve student success.

Perhaps you have heard these problems before:

- The legislature won't fund it.
- The state board won't consider it.
- The school board doesn't care about it.
- The superintendent doesn't believe it.
- Central office wants to control it.
- Principals don't have time for it.
- Parents fight it.

Fortunately, I continue to find compelling examples to contradict these beliefs. As with my examples years ago, in each case, I trace the outcomes back to one person or a small group of people.



The people who have influenced me took almost every action I described, and they were effective. I had a point of view, but every day it was influenced by those who made it a point of staying in contact, sharing stories, and making specific requests of me.



THE LEGISLATURE WON'T FUND IT.

For 25 years, Doug Miller worked for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. He was there when the legislature passed a bill requiring that all school systems set aside 1% of funds for professional development and instituting matching funds from the legislature. In his early years, Miller focused on helping school systems learn to make effective use of the resources. In his final years with the department, he fought every year to retain the financial commitment. He knew what it meant to the educators and students who benefitted from it. His intention was to not let the legislators shortchange their commitment to Missouri's educators and students.

Over time, he had many partners supporting his advocacy purpose. However, legislators knew he was the one who would be looking over their shoulders if they shortchanged that commitment. They knew that if they tried to change the law, he would be there. They knew he would gather his friends to put pressure on legislators. And, he did this from inside the state's department of education. Being a vocal critic from inside the system offers a set of pressures that those working from outside don't experience. At the same time, his position certainly strengthened his knowledge and perspective. He now works as a consultant for SuccessLink, a small nonprofit organization he formed years ago to disseminate best practices in learning in Missouri.

Miller's actions remind me of one of my favorite passages from the book *Reclaiming Our Democracy: Healing the Break Between People and Government* (Daley-Harris, 2004). This book provided inspiration for my own advocacy work. A substitute teacher founded RESULTS, an international citizens' lobby dedicated to creating the political will to end hunger, and this book tells the story of that organization. If a substitute teacher could step up and have that level of impact, surely I could influence a few policy makers on the issue of professional development. In the book, legislators talk about making a change in legislation supported by RESULTS. They admit the following: "Unless there is some force outside of you, carefully watching your every move and insisting that unnecessary compromises not be made, then you don't win the great wars, and this was one of the great wars."

Doug Miller viewed each legislative session and the professional development commitment as one of the great wars. We have evidence that it was that battle that contributed to the improved student achievement that Mis-



Doug Miller

souri achieved over the last five years.

Miller was also responsible for Learning Forward (then NSDC) getting involved in the policy aspect of professional development. Attending countless meetings with his state education colleagues, each year he would ask when we would finally take a stand on professional development and share that stand with the federal government. He was convinced that we needed to share our expertise and that the Department of Education would listen. When we hired René Islas as our first federal policy advisor, Miller took him under his wing and shared with him his view on how Learning Forward could have the greatest influence in Washington, D.C. Those early conversations guided our strategy and that work has paid off for the organization and the field. (See Hirsh's related column on this work on p. 76.) Doug Miller represents a story of the true power of one. I admire his tenacity, his fearlessness, his commitment, and his passion.

THE STATE BOARD WON'T ADOPT IT.

More than 10 years ago, I met another tempered radical. I borrow the phrase from another of my favorite books, *Tempered Radicals: How People Use Difference to Inspire Change at Work* by Debra Meyerson (2001). Tempered radicals are people who want to succeed in their organizations and live by their own values or identities, even if they are some-

how at odds with the dominant culture of their organizations. These words precisely describe another influence in my perception of the power of one, Steve Preston. When I met Preston, he worked for the Georgia Department of Education. He is now a consultant specializing in school improvement through high-impact learning environments. Once again, I found a person working in a bureaucratic system seeking ways to leverage the bureaucracy to have an impact across a state. He didn't see barriers; instead, he saw opportunities all around him.



Steve Preston

Preston wanted to discuss the latest and most important ideas influencing practice in our field. He was an advocate of standards-based professional development and solely responsible for ensuring that every school system in Georgia had whatever resources they needed to implement it. He worked in partnership with the Georgia Staff Development Council to ensure every system had guidance documents to engineer implementation of effective professional development at the system and school levels. Georgia was the first state to fund the use of NSDC's Standards Assessment Inventory for every district in the state to assess the impact of teacher professional develop-

ment. Most important for the field, because of his three-year investment in the Standards Assessment Inventory, we have data that show a predictive link between improving professional development and increasing student achievement.

I am most impressed, however, by our ongoing conversation about professional learning. As an organization, we were making a shift to emphasizing the concept of professional learning rather than professional development. We wanted people to focus on what they wanted educators to learn rather than the activities they were designing. Preston immediately embraced the language, and Georgia rules suddenly used professional learning everywhere. We started the conversation about Georgia's professional development requirements focusing on seat time rather than changes in teacher practice or student learning. I challenged Preston to consider how to make the shift to recognizing results rather than hours, and he was eager to accept that challenge. The state board of education accepted his rationale, and soon professional development requirements were transformed into Professional Learning Units with credit tied to demonstration of practice and results. I had never before witnessed such quick changes to state policy, the kind of changes that others claim will take years to achieve.

While Georgia still has work to do, Preston started the state down the path of asking the right questions. In October, we celebrated Gwinnett County Schools as winner of this year's Broad Foundation prize. This system is known for its comprehensive approach to effective professional development. My Georgia radical made sure for many years that they had resources to implement the professional development they knew was necessary to achieve their desired results.

THE COMMISSIONERS WON'T LISTEN.

Not only did she get three commissioners to listen, she got them to take a vision for effective professional learning to the state board, leading to statewide policy and practice change. Eileen Aviss-Spedding has worked for the New Jersey State Department of Education for 21 years. She is now the manager of professional standards. I think of Aviss-Spedding as a linchpin. In *Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?* (2010), Seth Godin describes a linchpin as someone who can walk into chaos and create order, someone who can invent, connect, create, and make things happen.

Like many of us who work in large organizations, Aviss-Spedding is often overwhelmed, feeling like she has many responsibilities but little authority to make things happen. Her impact comes from influencing all of those people with whom she interacts. She finds and attracts smart people, listens to them carefully, and then convinces them to help her accomplish their shared goal. She knows the steps to take and whom to convince,

and she facilitates the entire process from behind the scenes.

Aviss-Spedding knew that New Jersey needed a more powerful vision for professional development. She was able to convince the state commissioner of this need and that change would begin with a presentation of a white paper that outlined a clear vision. She helped him shape that vision by sharing her ideas and expertise. Then she coordinated a statewide task force to discuss the vision and create an action plan to move the state forward.

She understood that the important stakeholders needed to believe in and own any changes if they hoped to impact practice.



Eileen Aviss-Spedding

Aviss-Spedding is masterful at organizing groups of stakeholders, identifying the scope of their authority, investing in their learning to ensure they make the best recommendations possible, and working side by side with their leadership to craft to policy recommendations that turn into policy changes. Her fingerprints can be found on many years' worth of regulations impacting teacher induction, teacher professional development, principal preparation, principal development, and more. She works in a state known for one of the most powerful teacher and principal organizations, and she works hand in hand with all

partners until everyone agrees to do what is in the best interest of students and educators. She doesn't shy away from challenges. Because of her longevity and her role in a state agency, those who don't know her would describe her as a traditional bureaucrat. I describe her as a brilliant facilitator who leads groups to tough actions that impact students.

Aviss-Spedding faced a big test over the last three years. As she learned more about professional learning communities, she became convinced of their power to transform practice. She was determined to make sure every teacher in every school was a member of a learning community. She studied, talked to experts, examined the research, and supported a small pilot in one of the most challenged schools in the state. The impact of that pilot convinced her that this strategy for organizing schools was essential to improvement. She wrote a grant to develop a tool kit to distribute to all schools and created a plan for preparing all principals to lead learning communities. Aviss-Spedding achieved a monumental goal when her vision for schools was introduced into state board regulations. This is the first example I know of a state board saying it expects all teachers to be part of and benefit from learning community support. While leaders changed all around her, she stayed on course. Her legacy will be the significant gains New Jersey made in student achievement during her tenure in the state department. Those who know the complete story realize the role of the unassuming, hard-working, and gifted bureaucrat, my third hero, Eileen Aviss-Spedding.

Just showing up gives you access to policy makers who want to be able to report on the public input they gather. Believe me, the public that takes time to share points of view is very small. If you become a respected ally, there is no telling the level of influence you can have.

I could have chosen to highlight many other examples of the power of one. However, we know the challenges that those working in large departments face, and my heroes are inspiring models to remind us we can all find ways to overcome the barriers we face.

FIND YOUR POWER

Having served as a policy maker and learned from those who take action that leads to change, I offer suggestions for anyone interested and committed enough to become that voice of one.

Get involved in elections. The majority of policy makers are concerned about re-election. They listen to those who get involved or help in their races. While they appreciate financial contributions, they appreciate just as much those who take on the daily chores of a campaign. If you help them get elected, you become a trusted voice; they will accept your calls and listen to your requests.

Be visible at events where policy makers speak. Just showing up gives you access to policy makers who want to be able to report on the public input they gather. Believe me, the public that takes time to share points of view is very small. If you become a respected ally, there is no telling the level of influence you can have. If you wait until you have a problem to contact a policy maker, your point of view will be recorded but will not get the attention it would if you had already established your credibility.

Invite policy makers at all levels to your classroom, school, or system. Policy makers like to tell stories and stay in touch with constituents. These visits give them real-life examples of the points you make; this knowledge informs the future conversations they will need to have to meet your needs.

Become an ally with a staff member. If you are intimidated by the thought of trying to influence an elected official directly, then set your sights on someone you know who has influence on the policy maker. Make an appointment to meet the education advisor to introduce yourself; let them know you want to share your views on education.

Be respectful and appreciative of policy makers' service. Very few people who call on legislators and their staff take time to thank them for their service. People remember those who recognized they are performing a public service and acknowledge

that contribution. This courtesy makes your interactions memorable.

Make a simple request. Research your issue and understand what the policy maker can do to help. They don't have time to figure out the solution to the problem.

Always bring a solution. Ask permission to check in with them on how the effort is progressing — and then follow up.

The people who have influenced me took almost every action I described, and they were effective. I had a point of view, but every day it was influenced by those who made it a point of staying in contact, sharing stories, and making specific requests of me.

Set your sights on the policy you want to change and the person who can make the change happen. Perhaps the change you envision is from someone at a level I didn't describe. Perhaps your example is like some other "ones" that I admire:

- I'm inspired by the secondary teachers in Plano, Texas, who voted to increase class size to have an extra period off each day for team learning and problem solving.
- I'm inspired by Betty Dillon-Peterson, who recognized a need for an organization to serve staff developers and convinced eight male colleagues from other school systems to help her launch it.
- I'm inspired by Sue McAdams, staff development director in Rockwood, Mo., who refused to see roadblocks and instead saw multiple pathways to achieving professional development goals. She learned ultimately she could influence decision makers one conversation at a time.

- I'm inspired by Kay Psencik, who, when faced with incomprehensible accusations of her professional competence, fought to clear her name as she continued to do the work that meant a huge difference in the lives of educators and their students.
 - I am inspired by Bill Sommers, who time and time again speaks his point of view and assumes responsibility for turning around low-performing schools while at the same time telling policy makers the sacrifices that must be made to get substantive results.
 - I am inspired by progressive union leaders who push a reform agenda at the risk of losing their traditional base of support and their opportunities to lead.
- Most importantly, I look forward to being inspired by you.

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