

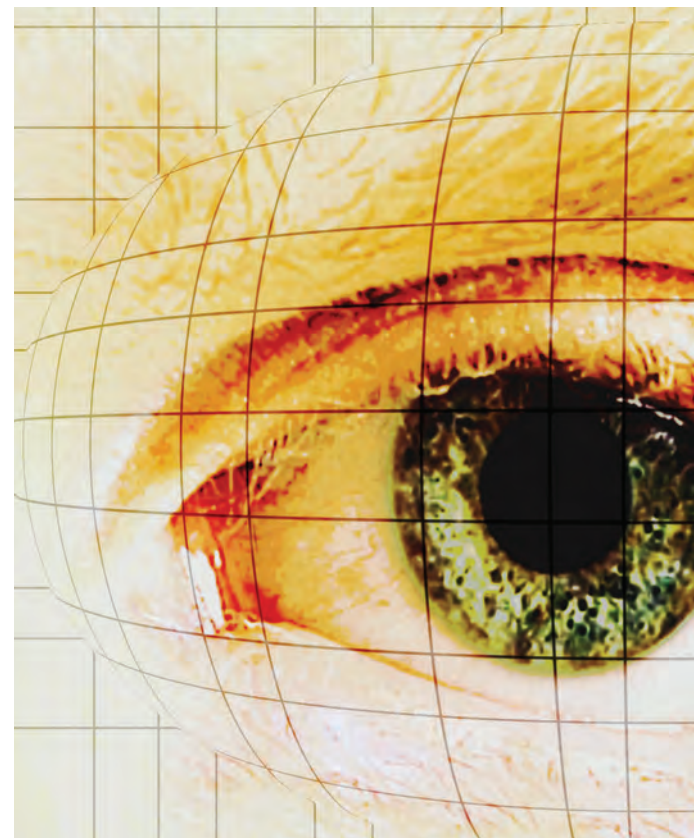
THE VIEW INSIDE THE BELTWAY

**SEATTLE TEACHER TRADES IN HER CHALK
FOR A CHANCE TO BE A LEGISLATIVE FELLOW**

By Kristina Peterson

National education reform happens with or without teacher input, but teachers are increasingly finding ways to enter the policy dialogue. In addition to traditional union representation and direct contact with elected representatives, emerging web 2.0 tools have created a new level of interaction between teachers and policy makers. I am a classroom teacher who sat squarely at the nexus of these interactions for 11 months as a legislative fellow with the Education and Labor Committee in the House of Representatives. In that role, I listened and responded to groups and individuals who came to our office to discuss federal education legislation. Throughout the year, I learned a variety of ways current and former teachers engage in policy.

Many citizens — teachers included — find it easy to identify problems with education. Policy often offers solutions to these problems. Policy is the seed of any law and the rationale behind regulations. Policy discussions involve those who craft laws, those who carry out regulations, and those who care about and are affected by an issue. How problems are defined and which solutions are considered



depend on the political climate, public opinion on the degree of the problem, and the base of support for implementing any solutions.

A former Chicago Public Schools teacher who is now working as a Democratic aide says it this way: “What I love about education policy is much like what I love about teaching. It presents complex problems that require outside-the-box thinking, close collaboration with diverse groups of people, and creative solutions.”

TEACHERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The education reform climate can be summed up as “the time of the teacher.” Every stakeholder recognizes the impact teachers have on student achievement, persistence, and retention. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s speeches regularly focus on teacher preparation, evaluation, and compensation (www.ed.gov/news/speeches). Vicki Phillips, director of Education and College Ready Initiatives at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, recently posted “Teachers Matter Most” on the foundation’s blog, summarizing the foundation’s initiative to identify effective teaching (www.gatesfoundation.org/foundation-notes/Pages/vicki-phillips-teachers-matter-most-100710.aspx). Congressional members share their view that teach-



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ers are the most important factor affecting student achievement during a Congressional hearing on “Supporting America’s Educators: The Importance of Quality Teachers and Leaders” (<http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/2010/05/supporting-americas-educators.shtml>). A recent article in the *New York Times* highlights research that shows the relationship between a person’s economic success and his or her kindergarten teacher (Leonhardt, 2010).

This focus on teachers is seen as the lever by which the situation for America’s schoolchildren may be improved. Placed at the center of the education policy arena, teachers have the opportunity to speak up and define the policy implications of their profession.

I taught math and science to 5th through 12th graders at an independent school in Seattle for 11 years. In fall 2008, inspired by my former students’ participation in the presidential election, I decided to interrupt my teaching career and find a way to serve, learn, and grow that was outside my comfort zone. I was awarded an Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship. I was drawn to the program’s goal to “increase understanding, communication, and cooperation between legislative and executive branches and the science, mathematics, and technology education community” (Triangle Coalition, n.d.). My husband gave

WHEN SPEAKING WITH EDUCATION POLICY STAFFERS ...

- Be clear in your appointment request so you meet with the most appropriate staff member.
- Know current legislative proposals and be prepared to weigh in with specific recommendations.
- Come to the staffer with consensus already built around your recommendations.
- Keep it short.
- Leave a one-page summary of your recommendations.
- Remember, the person you speak with may know very little or more than you about any given issue.

me his support to manage a bicoastal marriage, and the next thing I knew, I had a government ID badge, a BlackBerry, and five business suits.

My day-to-day work differed dramatically from teaching. I sat in a cube, not a classroom. I was made a staffer with the Education and Labor Committee with similar responsibilities to those around me. My duties included writing memos to the committee chairman and members, finding and vetting witnesses for congressional hearings, and helping to draft legislation. Early on in my fellowship,

I was given the sage advice that one needs to know the “people, policy, process, and politics” to see legislation through.

SHIFTING MY WORK TASKS

Meeting people came naturally. I learned to exchange business cards and quickly note on the backs of the ones I received the date I met the person and any key details to our conversation. I was saved by those notes more than once because I learned that my supervisors expected me to answer their questions quickly. I didn't need to know the exact answer right away, but I needed to know whom to contact to find the answer within a very short time frame. I became comfortable reaching out to people I didn't know well by e-mail or phone, and learned that most of those I contacted were honored to know their opinions were being considered.

Knowledge of people was also important for proposing witnesses for congressional hearings, so I kept an eye out for those education experts who were excellent public speakers and versatile but still focused under questioning.

I went from novice to emerging in my understanding of education policy by attending briefings and reading reports. Key references included Christopher Cross' *Political Education* (2003) for understanding the history of education policy and *Education Week* for the latest news. I tracked important events in science and math education by reading legislative updates from the National

Science Teachers Association (www.nsta.org) and the Triangle Coalition (<http://trianglecoalition.blogspot.com>). I attended briefings at the Department of Education, presentations on Capitol Hill by groups specifically interested in reaching congressional staff, and others around Washington, D.C., that were sponsored by nonprofit organizations, policy shops, think tanks, and universities. Educators outside the D.C. area can keep track of these events and briefings through webcasts. Most organizations provide web sites with links to live and archived events, podcasts, and briefing reports. See a few examples in the box at top right.

Education blogs were also an asset. For example, when I needed information quickly on the California legislature's activity related to its Race to the Top application, I turned to Educated Guess (<http://educatedguess.org/blog>), written by John Fensterwald. When I wanted to visit a blog with authentic teacher voices, I turned to the husband-and-wife team of Sara Goldrick-Rab and Liam Goldrick at Education Optimists (<http://educationoptimists.blogspot.com>).

TEACHERS AS ADVOCATES

A current trend is the emergence of teacher groups focused

ORGANIZATIONS THAT OFFER BRIEFINGS AND POLICY INFORMATION:

- Center for American Progress
www.americanprogress.org/events
- The Education Trust
www.edtrust.org
- The Alliance for Excellent Education
www.all4ed.org
- The Wallace Foundation
www.wallacefoundation.org/Pages/default.aspx

on policy. The College Board partnered with Phi Delta Kappa to host a dialogue among teachers. From that dialogue came the report *Teachers Are the Center of Education* (2009). They also sponsored a congressional briefing and organized meetings with teachers and legislative staff. The Internet provides a way for teachers to interact. Recently, a group of National Board Certified Teachers met in California to generate policy on teacher evaluation. The group released a report entitled *A Quality Teacher in Every Classroom* (2010). The nonprofit organization Hope Street Group launched a pilot web platform to give teachers an opportunity to provide recommendations on the teacher evaluation process (www.hopestreetgroup.org/community/education). The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession draws on teachers in crafting a broad range of policy discussions on its blog “Stories from School” (www.storiesfromschool.org).

Even with the emergence of virtual tools, face-to-face interactions are still essential. One of the most valuable things I learned during my fellowship was the importance of meeting with congressional staff. Research and consensus on policy needs to be brought to the staff's attention in person. See suggestions for speaking with congressional staffers in the box on p. 19.

PROCESS AND POLITICS

Policy work is difficult in a different way from teaching. Policy operates on a “hurry up and wait” basis. Staff may work for several months to craft a cohesive strategy in one policy area, only to see the legislation sliced to ribbons in a compromise over other issues. Windows of opportunity open and close quickly, and there are seasons to federal legislation tied to the election cycle. Coalition building, negotiation, and compromise are constants.

Proposed legislation must find a way to move through the process that cycles between administrative proposals and congressional authorization and appropriation. The Obama administration unveiled its education priorities in the report *A Blueprint for Reform* (www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/publicationtoc.html). Furthermore, the administration expressed interest in seeing reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, most recently reauthorized in 2001 as No Child Left Behind, by promising a

The Albert Einstein Fellowship selects practicing K-12 classroom science, math, and technology teachers and places them in Washington, D.C., working with federal agencies and Congress. Find applications and further information at www.trianglecoalition.org/ein.htm.

\$1 billion bonus in education funding if the process was completed this year. Congress holds the reins for writing and passing legislation. Because major legislation like ESEA encompasses so much policy, smaller education bills are most likely to be considered as part of overall education reform in ESEA. Both houses of Congress have held numerous hearings on ESEA and are poised to introduce their versions of ESEA. The timing of any policy depends on the process and politics.

There are general guidelines to the process, but these shift with the political landscape. From outside of Washington, it is easy to become impatient with the process. From the inside, it is amazing that anything can pass when there are so many ways for a bill to get snagged and only one impossibly narrow route to passage. Delays are often caused by a crowded agenda and the fact that the party in the majority is only interested in bringing legislation to a vote when it is likely to pass; rushing a vote may mean it fails. Passage in one chamber does not guarantee action in the other. Agreements negotiated between House and Senate versions inevitably lead to changes, so victories are celebrated along the process path by each contributor.

Many of the people involved in policy have formerly served in the classroom. I met former teachers now working in Congress, with the administration, with the Department of Education, and those working as lobbyists. When I asked one former teacher why she left teaching to pursue policy she said, “I don’t like to consider myself in one field or another. I have struggled continuously with whether I should be in the classroom or on the Hill, asking myself, ‘Do I want to have a substantial impact on fewer students or a diminished impact on many students? How can I best use my skills to better the field of education?’ ”

Many times during the past year, I reflected on the unique nature of the American legislative system that provides so many avenues for citizens to engage. Not everyone is able to or inter-

ested in interrupting his or her teaching career like I did, but avenues are increasingly available to find like-minded educators and work toward solutions.

Working on policy is hard, but in a different way than teaching. It requires patience, excellent communication skills — especially in difficult situations — and a view of the overall goal with simultaneous attention to detail.

Maybe they are not that different after all.

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