



## CALL TO ACTION

# Stephanie Hirsh

### Build your advocacy skills with this powerful strategy

**“H**ow can I be a better advocate for professional learning?”

This is a question I hear frequently from school and district leaders, many of whom are already doing so much to lead effective professional learning in their schools and organizations.

One of the three key concepts in the Leadership standard in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) says that leaders advocate for professional learning. While educators may recognize that advocating for professional learning is a responsibility they can't neglect, Advocacy 101 isn't always a course they can take on their way to being a principal.

I was in a similar position myself. I knew I needed to develop my own ability to advocate, and two different experiences influenced my views on how to go about it.

My positions as a district-level leader and next at then-NSDC made me wonder about school boards. Logic told me that there was no reason school boards would oppose professional development for educators. Who could possibly be against building teacher and administrator capacity so they could serve all children? In my eagerness to understand their viewpoint — and also to serve my community — I decided to run for school board to see how they think and, ultimately, influence their thinking.

Through the election process and throughout my three terms, a group

of women I referred to as my “kitchen cabinet” kept me informed of issues in the community and tried to sway my opinion on key votes. From that experience, I learned the power of influence, information, and allies when tough decisions must be made. I had many supporters along the way — and these same folks wanted my support in return. That's where I saw just how critical relationships are for changing minds and policies.

My second set of lessons came when I learned about RESULTS, an international advocacy organization that works to reduce poverty and hunger around the world. Its main strategy is to use advocacy to build political will in Congress to appropriate funds toward activities that support ending hunger. *Reclaiming Our Democracy*, a book by RESULTS founder Sam Daley-Harris (Camino Books, 2013), was extremely helpful to me at a time when I was creating my own advocacy tool kit.

Takeaways I like to share include:

- There's no substitute for knowing your subject deeply. Study and be the expert before you make your case.
- Get folks engaged through the power of telling stories about real educators and real children.
- Always end with your “ask.” Don't leave the room without making a real request that you know your listeners can fulfill if they have the will to do so.

The tool I use from RESULTS over and



over again is the laser or elevator talk — a speech so short you can say it on a ride in the elevator. Here's a bare-bones framework for the laser talk that ensures that you state your case concisely and end by making a request.

1. Identify the problem.
2. Define your solution.
3. Make a request for action.

Consider developing a laser talk about professional learning this week and deliver it to someone who needs to hear your request. Please let me know how it goes — these are skills we all must build if we're to advocate effectively for professional learning that improves student outcomes.

#### REFERENCE

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.

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