

TOOLS

How to cultivate teacher voice

Years later, the story still makes us queasy. A group of teachers in a southern state (identities concealed to protect the innocent) were fighting for change to education legislation. They demanded a meeting with the state chair of the education committee, who left session to meet with them in the hallway. The teachers voiced their concern and told stories of public school systems that needed an overhaul.

The legislator listened intently. “Okay, I hear you,” he said. “But what exactly do you want me to do?”

The reply: “That’s your job to figure out.”

This scene — which still haunts the education policy veteran who recently told us the story — is one that often plays out across the nation, and it’s frustrating for all sides.

Let’s begin to rectify this by realizing some broad truths. Teachers want to work in systems that recognize

them as professionals with valuable insights. Yet almost any teacher you meet can tell you about the limited opportunity he or she has had providing input on policies, programs, or the implementation of any change that occurs in his or her school, district, state, or country. And, despite the number of teachers who are discouraged by and, in some cases, disenfranchised by current systems, little attention is paid to the importance of teacher agency. Teacher expertise and insights are valuable resources untapped by most districts and states.

That’s why, as we begin the implementation of new federal education laws with the Every

Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), teachers need to seek and create opportunities to use their teacher agency in advocating for relevant and effective professional learning. And as educators prepare to exercise agency around this or any policy issue, creating short documents that provide context and reasons for requests will benefit teachers and the decision makers they seek to inform. Just as important: Teachers should seek the input and support of their colleagues. Policy and decision makers are often swayed by a person’s ability to get consensus among their peers.

Too often, when teachers are given a forum to make their voices heard, they are unprepared to make clear, actionable requests from policymakers. The following tools are designed to help practitioners cultivate teacher voice and agency in policy decisions — to better prepare you for that three-minute conversation you may have with district or state policymakers and stakeholders.

KNOW YOUR 'ASK'

Policymakers are busy and have multiple people lobbying for their attention and action. You must be prepared to give clear, concise requests of specific actions that a legislator, executive, or stakeholder can take. Here are questions you can ask to help you prepare:

1. What is the specific outcome you want from the meeting or contact?
2. Based on your research of the issue, what can the policymaker do to help? What is beyond his or her scope?
3. What is the problem this specific action will solve? (The policymaker doesn’t have time to figure out the solution to the problem. Spell out all the options and the ramifications of each course of action.)
4. Have you researched and debated the opposition points to your stance to prepare key data and anecdotal support to your ask? (Policymakers will usually quiz you on this.)
5. If you don’t have a specific ask, what else can this person do? Example: Cultivate a relationship in hopes of future collaboration and support of an important issue or program.
6. Can the policymaker use you or your group as a resource when they need additional expertise or feedback on education-related issues? If so, make the case why this is in his or her best interests.

CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS

It is crucial that you do not assume expertise on the issues and policy decisions you are advocating. Do your research — become an expert on all sides of an issue. Become a resource, not a divisive force. Here are some questions to consider when you begin this process.

- How can you keep your efforts to influence policy from becoming a drive-by event?
- How can you build relationships with policymakers?
 - Establish credibility over time.
 - Build rapport.
 - Offer solutions.
 - Show up and follow up.
- How can you incorporate your experience, stories, and firsthand knowledge about students into your interactions with policymakers?
- How might you push back respectfully?
 - Be selective.
 - Find common ground.
 - Ask a question.
- How should you prepare for the meeting?
 - Do your homework:
 - Where do policymakers stand?
 - What are their levers?
 - What will you ask them to do?
- How should you use your time during the meeting?
 - Spend more time on solutions than problems.
 - Ask questions to guide the discussion.
 - It's easier for policymakers to hear messages when people are united.
- Whom should you contact?
- What are some ways to get your message across?
 - Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)
 - Websites
 - Webinars
 - In-person forums

Source: Learning Forward & National Commission on Teaching & America's Future. (2016). *Agents for Learning toolkit: A guide to amplifying teacher voice and stakeholder engagement.* Oxford, OH: Author. Available at www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/getinvolved/essa/teacheragency_essa_toolkit.pdf.

DEVISE AN ACTION PLAN

Careful planning is key to being an effective amplifier of teacher voice. Use this tool to help you devise an action plan regarding your policy advocacy, depending on the scenario and goal you are working toward.

Possible scenarios include (but are not limited to):

- Providing input on proposed regulations or proposed guidance released by the U.S. Department of Education;
- Speaking at local school board meetings (public comments often limited to three minutes or less) or state chief, commissioner, superintendent, or director’s town hall meetings;
- Participating in a regional or statewide committee;
- Participating or running a competition for school districts to provide input into the state plan;
- Testifying before a legislative committee or state board; or
- Contacting your congressional delegation.

SCENARIO					
GOAL			DESIRED COMPLETION DATE		
ACTION PLAN					
Task	Desired outcome	Responsible person(s)	Due date	Resources required	Notes/ next action

EXTERNAL PARTNER ROLES/CONTRIBUTIONS					
Request	Organization	Responsible party	Date needed	Outcome	Next action

PREPARE YOUR LASER TALK

A well-prepared two-minute laser talk or elevator speech is the tool to use during a chance or a planned encounter with a policymaker. 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. A well-structured laser talk addresses a need, solution, and request.

Learning how to speak powerfully about our issues is one of the most important tools in an advocate’s tool kit. This format was created by Results, an organization devoted to eliminating world hunger, to enable its volunteers to create short and compelling talks that are the backbone of their work.

EPIC

- **Engage**
- **Problem**
- **Inform**
- **Call**

Laser talks can be used during chance encounters with policymakers at any level, during phone calls with legislators, and in meetings with newspaper editorial boards.

EPIC is an acronym to help remember the basics of creating a laser talk. The letters in EPIC stand for **engage**, state the **problem**, **inform** about the solution and give the **call** to action. Use this to structure your talk.

EPIC TASK	EXPLANATION	EXAMPLE
Engage your audience.	Get your listener’s attention with a dramatic fact or short statement. Keep this opening statement to one sentence if possible.	“I know you share my concern about improving the quality of teaching for all students.”
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.”
Inform about solutions.	Inform the listener about a solution to the problem you just presented.	“We can change that if Congress passes Senate Bill 1979, which includes a change in the definition of professional learning in the law. 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.”
Call to action.	Once you’ve engaged your listener, presented the problem and a solution, be specific about what you want the listener to do. This enables you to follow up to learn if he or she has 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 the new law? Would you become a co-sponsor for that legislation?”

TELL US

Readers tell us that Learning Forward’s tools are copied hundreds of times — for years — and are used in schools and district offices every day. To encourage more copying, we are providing BLACKLINE MASTERS to help educators to make clear copies while conserving school resources. We avoided heavy black fonts to keep copies from smearing with some machines. Please let us know what else we can do to make the tools more useful.

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