

Political Advocacy: Extending Your Leadership

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Introduction

School librarians have a long and storied history of politically advocating for issues and funding that contribute to what we believe as a profession: that every child has the right to an effective school library program in order to develop critical thinking skills and a disposition towards lifelong learning. As of 2017, there were over 80,000 public school libraries in the United States (about 90% of schools). However, since 2007 library staffing ratios have been in continuous decline (Lance 2018). The wealthiest schools have five times more librarians per school than do the poorest, which also tend to be high-minority schools (Jessen 2018). Our schools, and the libraries within them that should be providing access to information, are doing so inequitably as a result of educational policy at the state, federal, and local levels.

School librarians are in an incredible position to leverage their inside knowledge of effective library programs in order to civically engage in the political process. You may have experience as a classroom teacher and a graduate credential in school librarianship. You may be just starting out with emergency licensure/certification. You may have a master's in information or library sciences without K-12 educator preparation. You may work in an independent school. By virtue of your professional experience or a graduate credential, you are immersed in the day-to-day leadership of your library. You interface regularly with students, faculty, staff, and administrators. If you are a public educator, you have an understanding of governance by a school board or board of trustees. All of this is to say that *you* have knowledge and expertise that can be shared with policymakers as they consider issues and make decisions that impact school library programs.

Leverage Your Existing Leadership Skills

The leadership in which you engage and feel competent can be leveraged into leadership in the political arena, be it local, state, or federal. School librarians are prepared to be leaders and can use their strengths to influence the political process. Typically, the librarian works solo or is part of a small team. In this position, you may have experience leading professional development for teachers. You may work closely with your administrator and even be part of the school leadership team. You may be the technology expert, literacy expert, or both within your school. Whatever form your leadership takes, rest assured that the skills and dispositions that you have acquired through these activities will transfer into political advocacy.

Policymakers Need Your Expertise

Policymakers at all levels of government come from a variety of backgrounds. They may have worked in business or industry, agriculture, public service, or law, to name just a few professions. They may have been a stay-at-home parent. They may have been staff for a politician and decided to run for office. They may have been an educator or professor. Policymakers may or may not be the product of the public school system, but typically, they shape their views and opinions about K-12 schooling based on the "apprenticeship of observation"—that is, their perception of schooling is based on their interactions with the school system, from the vantage point of a student, a parent, or a patron.

Policymakers may feel that they have a complete and thorough understanding of schools, but they have not had the advantage of leading a library program. What policymakers know about school library programs is certainly valid from their own vantage points, but they have much to learn from you, the expert professional. The knowledge and expertise that you provide to policymakers is beneficial to them as they make decisions that impact school libraries.

Step Out of Your Comfort Zone

A statement I often hear from school librarians whom I work with in political advocacy training is one of discomfort—discomfort in approaching a policymaker for fear of stepping on toes, discomfort in sharing what you know and understand for fear that you might expose gaps in your knowledge, or discomfort in touting your own accomplishments as a leader of an effective library program. I would like to reassure you that these thoughts are perfectly normal, but I would also like to challenge you to own the knowledge and expertise that you have and share it with policymakers, just like you would with students, faculty, or administrators.

Policymakers want to make decisions based on accurate information, and you are in a position to provide that information to them. You may wish to frame an interaction with a policymaker as a persuasive reference interview. As an educator and information professional, you are supplying the most accurate information about effective library programs to someone who is interested in what you have to say. Remember that policymakers cannot do their jobs without the information provided by their constituents. You don't have control over how a policymaker may vote on an issue, but you do have the absolute right and ability to provide that policymaker with information about effective school library programs.

The Universal Principle of Leadership: Relationship Building

All leadership is fundamentally about relationship building. And, relationship building is the foundation of successful advocacy in the political arena. You already do this as a school librarian. Take some time to reflect upon your strengths in building relationships,

as well as what you may need to bolster. Increasing your efficacy in relationship building will assist you in influencing policymakers in the political arena.

The background information needed to build relationships with policymakers can be acquired by observing and listening, in addition to asking questions of participants (legislators, lobbyists, other advocates, etc.) in a tactful and noninvasive manner that comes from a place of wanting to understand the complexities of the policymaking process. Relationships vary from context to context and change over time as new players enter the political arena and veterans leave.

As a political advocate, it is important to keep your ear to the ground. The process of policymaking is messy and complex, and you don't really know what is in it or how it came to be. Although the relationships you build with policymakers will vary in each context, there are a few universal rules that you should know about and abide by:

1. *Credibility comes first and reputation is everything.* Elected officials and their staff depend on political advocates for accurate information. Misleading an elected official or his or her staff will guarantee failure and sever the relationship with that individual. Furthermore, everyone will find out, and it will become very difficult to be an effective political advocate. This ethic of trust is paramount.
2. *Only the facts count.* It is important to separate facts from rhetoric when speaking to policymakers or their staff.
3. *Try not to burn your bridges.* Henry Kissinger famously said, "America has no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests" (D'Souza 2015). The same holds true for political advocacy. You may find yourself advocating for school libraries with someone who does not hold the same opinions on other political matters. It is important that differences be put aside in the interest of the shared goal.
4. *Success equals compromise.* In 1867, German statesman Otto von Bismarck said that "politics is the art of the possible" (Steinberg 2011). It is likely that you will need to compromise when advocating for school library issues.
5. *Create a dependency.* Think of the relationship between you and the policymaker as mutually beneficial. For example, politicians rely on good press to bolster their re-electability. When a policymaker makes decisions that are beneficial to school libraries based on your advocacy, ensure that the policymaker can also receive a benefit as a result.
6. *Work with whomever will help.* Coalitions are an important strategy in political advocacy. You may find individuals or organizations that share common interests. It is important to work with them, even if you disagree with other positions they may hold. In order to advance school libraries, work with anyone who agrees with your issue. (Adapted from Berry and Wilcox 2018, pp. 134–139)

Conclusion

In summary, I encourage you to reflect upon the ways in which you *already* enact the above rules of relationship building. Additionally, think about your knowledge and expertise as a professional educator and school librarian. Determine where you have a deep understanding, as well as where you need to bolster your knowledge and expertise. Then reach out to the appropriate policymaker and share what you have to offer. As a constituent, you are an important part of government, and policymakers cannot effectively do their jobs without you. I wish you the best of luck on your political advocacy journey.

Works Cited

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