

Mentoring Advocates in the Context of Early Childhood Education

by Sessy I. Nyman

Advocates have been a critical component in every social movement that effects change. Whether we examine the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Movement, or the movement to create a public K-12 educational system, movements are made up of individual advocates. Types of advocates and how they create change vary greatly, but what ties them together is their common goal.

In the field of early childhood education, we have the foundation for an effective, broad-based coalition of advocates; there is much work to be done. Growing our advocacy community must be a high priority for everyone who cares for the future of young children — one advocate at a time. The work of each and every advocate is critical if we are to reach our goal of high quality early learning and education for each child.

ADVOCATES ARE PEOPLE WHO BRING AN ISSUE TO LIFE

There are no specific prerequisites for being an advocate. Most people advocate for something every day of their lives. It is in our nature when we believe in something or have a passion for the issue. The challenge lies in being an effective advocate — connecting the day to day work to a larger movement.

The Day Care Action Council of Illinois (DCACI) is a statewide advocacy organization, one of the few in the state to have a full time lobbyist who works with elected officials to further an agenda that supports high quality care and education for all young children. DCACI has a broad membership base of child care providers, parents, and other advocates. The strength of the agency does not lie only in its legislative relationships and policy know-how but equally on its grassroots constituency.

In the spring of 2002, the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program faced drastic cuts that would have crippled child

care providers and devastated low-income families already struggling to keep their children in high quality programs. Over the course of 10 weeks, thousands of parents and child care providers across the state wrote letters, called their legislators, and rallied at the Capitol. In the end, no cuts were levied against the program — one of very few social service support programs that were not cut in a year of severe budget shortfall.



Sessy Nyman is the director of the Public Policy and Advocacy Program of the Day Care Action Council of Illinois. Before becoming director in 2001, Sessy worked as the government relations (lobbyist) and field organizer for the Program. By combining both positions, Sessy has been able to learn first hand the barriers to quality early childhood education around the state, and then bring these issues to the Illinois General Assembly in the form of legislative and administrative advocacy campaigns. Since 1999, Sessy has been involved in growing Illinois' child care program to be one of the best in the nation — so stated by *Working Mother* magazine. Included in her accomplishments are passing the Great START legislation, supporting funding to serve over 200,000 children per month, developing a statewide forum for parents and providers (called the Public Policy Caucus), as well as spearheading other policies and legislative efforts affecting low-income working families and their children. Ms. Nyman has her BA in Government and International Relations from The University of South Carolina and her MS in Cultural Geography from The University of Massachusetts-Amherst. While a graduate student, Sessy focused on methods and strategies of grassroots organizing, with a concentration in community participation and project sustainability. She conducted her research among highland agriculturists in the north-central region of Guatemala. As director, Sessy divides her time between the legislature in Springfield, visiting parents and providers around the state, and her office in Chicago.

The key was not the access DCACI had to policy makers, nor was it the relationship DCACI had with community providers and parents statewide. Instead, it was the combination of both that made its advocacy efforts so effective. Individual advocate's actions were multiplied and made more effective because they were part of a larger campaign.

It is most effective when advocates come from a wide array of fields and interests to create a broad foundation for support. With a diverse foundation, an issue is brought to life for a variety of constituencies, in a variety of ways that more people can relate to and understand. Our challenge, as early childhood advocates, is to make the issue of high quality care and education for young children everyone's issue. If it remains only *our* issue, we will never be successful.

In Illinois we have long worked to engage the business community as advocates for early care and education. Because they have a different constituency than either the *typical* parent or provider advocate, they speak from a business, workforce, or economic perspective of why child care matters. They often have networks and friends that early care and education advocates may not be able to access. Clearly, growing our advocacy community in numbers and diversity is critical to broad-based support and long-term change. Our goal is to make everyone an early childhood advocate: professional advocacy groups, researchers, elected officials, child care providers, pre-school and K-3 teachers, parents, community members, members of the business community, civic organizations, and unions. Many voices singing the same chorus is always more effective in creating change.

THE ROLE OF MENTORS

Everyone has the capacity to be an advocate, but to be an effective advocate takes time and support. This is the role of the mentor in building advocates. Mentors can be many things to many people; the key is to be the right thing at the right time.

Any mentor, no matter what the issue or circumstance, needs to recognize the individual capacities of the person they mentor. One of the biggest mistakes a mentor can make is to measure one person against another, or worse, against him/herself. Just as there are advocates from all walks of life, there are individuals with different levels of ability and commitment.

In its simplest form, the role of a mentor is to recognize each advocate's abilities and then build upon them. Understand-

ing the starting point of a potential advocate will define the long process of mentoring the individual's potential.

Consider this scenario: Sylvia was a life-long advocate now in a position to bring others along. She had been a central decision-maker to the children's movement, marched on Washington too many times to remember, established personal relationships with her local and national legislators, and effected change for children for over 20 years. She is a born advocate and wants to nurture future advocates and leaders for children. To her peers and fellow life-long advocates, Sylvia is a natural leader and thus, a natural mentor.

She is excited to share what she knows with others, so they too might become effective advocates for children. However, early on she became frustrated when a mentee did not participate in Saturday meetings, was unable to commit to national trainings, and did not feel comfortable speaking to large audiences. After a short time Sylvia told her mentee that he did not have the qualities to be an effective advocate. She put the fault on the mentee, but the fault was in her skills as a mentor. A huge opportunity was lost.

From the beginning, Sylvia defined the criteria by her personal standards and skills; she did not begin with a clear understanding of the starting point for her mentee's emerging leadership. Instead of building a life-long advocate, she convinced a potential advocate that *he didn't have what it takes*.

To be an effective mentor, it is important to remember that the charge is not to clone yourself, but instead to identify skills and potential in the person you are mentoring and then to nurture the development of those skills. Sylvia could have nurtured the personal relationships the mentee already possessed, set up one-on-one meetings rather than creating large group settings, and built on the personal experience and knowledge of the mentee to help him begin to see his advocacy potential. In time, the confidence of the new advocate grows, and he or she looks for new challenges and opportunities for growth.

Ultimately, a mentor is charged with developing skills in a potential advocate, as well as:

- helping 'beginner advocates' recognize that they are already advocates, and what they already do, however small, makes a difference.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

- helping grow and nurture advocacy efforts — looking not only at skill but context and reach.
- demonstrating to the advocate how his or her efforts fit into a larger movement.
- helping the advocate identify key relationships they currently have, and encouraging them to establish new relationships that will extend the reach and impact of their work.
- supporting the advocate in the pieces of advocacy that are new, until the advocate feels comfortable doing it on his or her own.
- encouraging every advocate to be a leader and continually reaching out to engage new advocates committed to the same goals.

PART OF A MOVEMENT

In reality we are all part of a state, national, and even international movement that supports high quality care and education for all children. This is a big concept for many advocates to get their arms around. It is always important to be aware of the larger movement or vision, while at the same time making the issue local and real. When an issue has immediate impact on local children, it is much easier to build a broad base of support.

All advocates must be part of a movement, group, or network that can directly affect public policy. Policy is the primary way to create overarching, long-lasting change. While the work that happens in our neighborhood, our school district, or our town are all important, unless they connect to the larger public policy process, real change will not occur.

WHAT AN ADVOCATE NEEDS

Passion is the essence, the necessary requirement for advocacy. It provides the essential foundation upon which other advocacy skills can be built. A review of the following list can help gauge an advocate's skill and knowledge level, whether the advocate is you or someone you are mentoring. Knowing where you are at the beginning points you in the direction of where you need to grow — this is an important first step in mentoring an advocate.

- **Understanding the issue.** Many advocates understand the issue from their own perspective or experiences. However, in order to build support and ownership of the issue among others, understanding the entire issue, with all its complexities, is critical. It is essential to be able to explain the issue and its importance to people who might not be early childhood professionals or who do not have young children.
- **The context.** Knowing at least part of the history of an issue is critical to mapping out where it will go. Why has ECE emerged today as such an important issue? What has changed to increase demand? How have our expectations changed for young children? What is the role of ECE?
- **Messaging.** The work of creating a message or building support happens in two primary categories:
 1. Creating public will is central to the work of an advocate. If the general public does not support a concept or an issue, then the chances that change will happen are slim. Having a broad range of support and demonstrating need and effect is important in building public will.
 2. Creating political commitment largely depends on the ability to create public will and to make sure elected officials know that the public supports the issue. We do this in a variety of ways, including relationship building, networking, public education, and media exposure. Just as it is important that advocates individually work towards a common goal, so too is it critical that the work comes together in a common message.
- **Relationship building.** Relationships are built over time, by establishing trust, respect, and common interests. Whether engaging an elected official, other advocates, parents, or community members, relationships are crucial to an advocate's success. Understanding that a relationship goes beyond the current issue or campaign is critical for a new advocate.
- **Understanding the players.** Who are the players? They are anyone and everyone you interact with, who cares about your issue, who is effected by your advocacy work, or even who might take a contrary view of your issue. They are also the leaders on your issue — the people making decisions, the people people listen to, and the people who have made a difference in the past. While everyone is important in turning an issue into policy, the

players are the faces that the general public connects with the issue.

- **Why should anyone else care?** Early childhood care and education affects every segment of our society. An effective advocate will be able to explain how the issue affects different populations in different ways. The reasons why a parent cares about early childhood care may be different from why the local Chamber of Commerce cares. Both are important. The cost-benefit model of investing in quality early care and education is just as compelling to some legislators as the new research on brain development in infants is to others. By working with advocates from various fields, you learn how to craft your message in order to reach a variety of populations which helps you to ultimately be successful.

Thinking of advocacy skills in these ways will enable a mentor to help advocates recognize their skills and potential, and then to nurture strengths, overcome weaknesses, and understand the context.

MENTORING CHANGE

Change happens in a variety of ways, and a good mentor can ensure that each venue and opportunity for advocacy is the most effective it can be. As a young person entering the world of community activism and advocacy, I needed the leadership, guidance, and inspiration of mentors so that I could see my potential and the possibilities for change.

It is appropriate to write this article now, as the climate in our nation is not one conducive to highlighting the deficiencies in our various systems. States are facing major budget shortfalls, and critical services like child care and other early learning opportunities are being cut; some to the point of their collapse.

This is also a time of great opportunity for change. There is a national awakening around the importance of early brain development and the critical impact of high quality early learning opportunities for children from birth to five. There is growing concern in the business and education communities that if we don't invest in our very youngest learners, then we can never expect to have successful students and productive professionals in the future.

Now is the time to become an advocate, mentor an advocate, and grow our community of advocates for high quality early learning for all children.

TEN COMMANDMENTS OF POLICY ADVOCACY

Start with a base. Your base should reflect the breadth and diversity of support for your issue.

Work on a bi-partisan basis. This is the only way to avoid gridlock between the two chambers and the executive.

Cultivate a legislative champion in each house. Advocates, grassroots supporters, and lobbyists can only do so much; the sponsor must be a committed advocate when the legislation is debated.

Create a simple message that explains your issue, and then make sure that your supporters repeat it, over and over again.

Develop human-interest stories to demonstrate your points. Do not underestimate the power of anecdotes.

Organize a *creative* coalition in support of the issue. The most effective coalition partners lend an element of surprise; they are not expected to support the issue and may have opposed you before.

Activate your grassroots support. Legislators care most about issues that affect their own constituents. At the state or local level (not Congress), their unique letters or telephone calls create an impression of widespread support or opposition on all but the most controversial issues — on the same theory that ten cockroaches in a kitchen appear to be an infestation.

Be ready to compromise. No policy of government ever looks the same as when it was proposed.

Never lie or mislead a policy-maker about the importance of an issue, the opposition's position or strength, or any other matter. Your word is your bond.

Use the media to focus on public debate and to generate interest in the issue. Legislators and policy-makers are especially sensitive to media approval and criticism.

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