



Advocacy 101: Five rookie mistakes and how to avoid them

By Dana Woldow

We all make mistakes, especially when we are just starting to do something new, but there are some common pitfalls of advocacy you can avoid if you learn from the mistakes of others. All of the stories here are true; only the names have been changed to protect the embarrassed.

1. Don't give out other people's personal contact info without permission

Anne was promoting a successful project she had led at her middle school. When talking to a reporter about it, she provided contact information for several others who had helped her with the project, including the Principal's personal cell phone number. Unfortunately, she had not first asked her allies for permission to give out their personal contact information, and several of them were more than a little angry with Anne, and let her know it.

What went wrong: Anne's mistake was that she was not prepared to be asked by the reporter about who else had worked on the project. As a general rule, it is okay to answer a reporter's question about who else she can talk to by naming people who have already agreed to speak with the media, or people whose job it is to speak with the media, such as your school district's public relations department. It is usually okay to provide information which is readily available on the school district's website, such as the name of your school Principal, or the school's main phone number. It is not okay to provide the Principal's cell phone number without her permission, even if it is a school-owned cell phone and not her personal one. It is not okay to give out anyone's name or any contact information without first making sure that they are willing to be contacted by the media, and ideally also giving them a heads up about what specifically you are doing.

What should have happened: When asked who else worked on the project, rather than blurting out names and personal contact info, Anne could have provided only job titles (the school principal, the school nurse, several parents) and the school's main switchboard number. Ideally, she would have already mentioned her upcoming meeting with the reporter to her allies, and gotten their permission to provide their names as contacts. Failing that, she certainly should have made it her first order of business, upon finishing the interview, to call the school and alert anyone who she had named as a contact that they might be getting a call from a reporter asking about the project.

If Anne didn't know how to answer the question about who else could be contacted, she could have stalled. As I have explained [here](#), you should always get contact information from any reporter you speak with. In this case, Anne could have asked the reporter for her e-mail address, and told her that she would get back to her promptly with the contact information for others to speak with about the project.

In the case of the district PR department, this is their job; they are not going to mind if you refer a reporter to their office, but you also want them to know what to say when the reporter calls. Give them the courtesy of informing them exactly what the call would be about, and a copy of whatever information you have written up about your project, which you would like them to share with the media.

Lesson: Don't ever let one of your project allies get called out of the blue by a reporter, and especially not on her cell or home phone!

2. Don't invite reporters to your school without permission

Beth was thrilled when she sent out a press release about the project her school was doing, and got a call from a local TV station wanting to send a crew the next day to film in the school's cafeteria at lunchtime. Beth immediately agreed to meet the crew at school the next day just before lunch. The next morning, Beth saw the Principal at school and told him that a TV news crew would be coming in a few hours to film in the cafeteria. She was shocked to hear the Principal tell her that the crew would not be allowed in, and that she must cancel the filming on the spot. The Principal stood there and watched while an embarrassed Beth called the TV reporter and explained that the filming could not take place after all.

What went wrong: Beth's mistake was inviting the media in without first clearing it with the Principal. Parents have all kinds of legitimate reasons why they may not want their children to appear on camera – there may be an issue with a noncustodial parent, or a child and his mother may be hiding from an abusive spouse or boyfriend. Some people have religious objections to their children being filmed; others may be more worried than most about the possible dangers of child predators seeing their adorable daughter and the name of her school on TV. Some teachers may have their own reasons for not wanting to appear on TV, even in the background. As a parent, you are not likely to be aware of any of this drama at your school, but it is your Principal's job to know about it. She is responsible for everything that goes on at the school site, and that includes respecting people's right to privacy.

In my school district, parents are asked to sign an "opt out" form at the beginning of the year if they want to be assured that their child will not appear in the media. Media cameras can be allowed in to schools, but it usually requires a few days' notice, so that school staff have time to go through the opt out forms, identify the students who need to stay out of the limelight, and make sure that everyone is aware that cameras are coming on site. That way, everyone's right to privacy is respected, and the media can still tell their story, showing only students whose families are willing to participate.

What should have happened: When Beth got the call from the TV reporter, she should have said, "That sounds like a great idea to film at our school. Can you give me some time to get approval from the Principal, and then I will call you back?" This is standard procedure for most schools and would not likely have come as a surprise to the reporter. Few stories about school food reform are so timely that they must be filmed within 24 hours. If your time line is that short, you are not sending out your press releases far enough in advance. Keep in mind the need to get permission for the media to show up when you are planning the timeline for your PR, and allow

plenty of time to get the necessary permission. Don't send out a PR on Friday for an event happening Tuesday; send it out a week or ten days in advance.

Lesson: Have all your ducks in a row before you invite the media to your school.

3. Don't alienate your potential allies

As a new Kindergarten dad, Chris was unhappy with the lunches he saw being served at his son's school, and decided to go to the school's parent association to demand help with making the food better. He attended the first parent group meeting of the year and made an impassioned speech to the several dozen parents in attendance, harshly critiquing the school's food and asking parents to join him in forming a committee to make change. He was surprised to be met with a strained silence; finally, the head of the parent group said she would like to chat with him after the meeting. Later, to Chris' intense discomfort, it was explained to him that the school already had a committee working on the issue, that the meals he was seeing were already an improvement over what was being served a few years earlier, and that he should work with the existing group and not try to reinvent the wheel.

What went wrong: Chris didn't do his homework. By coming into his first parent association meeting with guns blazing, Chris alienated the very people who would have been his strongest allies, and it took him almost a year of assisting humbly with their efforts before he felt comfortable working with the existing group.

What should have happened: Chris should have asked around to see if there was already another parent or another group working on his issue. He should have learned what efforts had already been made, and what had already been accomplished, so that his criticism would not be seen as an attack on the accomplishments of those already working towards his goals. The first meeting of the parent group would have been a good place for Chris to ask these questions, instead of assuming that he was the first person ever to have the idea of trying to fix school food.

Parent groups, especially PTA, often use a Big Tent approach; that is, they try to appeal to the broadest number of individuals by not sticking to just one cause or concern, but embracing many causes. Nonetheless, because of manpower constraints, even a Big Tent organization must prioritize, and only focus on a few issues at a time. There may already be a group working on your issue, but if not, you may have to wait your turn to get the attention you need for your cause. Every other member of the parent group has an issue, and all of them feel just as strongly about their issue as you do about yours. Some of them may have been waiting years to have their issue brought to prominence, and they will not appreciate your showing up and expecting your issue to be prioritized over theirs. Be willing to work on the issues that your parent group has already prioritized, and then when it is time for your issue to come to the forefront, you can realistically expect other parents to help you, because you helped them.

Lesson: Find out what is already happening in your community before making your pitch, and be willing to wait your turn!

4. Don't make change before informing the whole community, including teachers

Dominique wanted to start a Grab n Go breakfast at her high school, so she talked to the Principal and to the food services director, and they both were willing to try it out. The first day was a disaster! Teachers flooded the Principal's office with complaints – the students spilled cereal and milk on the floor; they couldn't eat and take notes at the same time, so instructional time was wasted; garbage was not collected after the meal, and by the afternoon, there was a smell of sour milk in some rooms; there were concerns that the school's existing problem with ants, rodents and other vermin would blossom out of control. Some teachers noted the spilled milk and suggested that the pancake syrup on the menu for later in the week would create an even bigger mess. The Grab n Go never made it to pancake day – it was canceled after the first day.

What went wrong: Although Dominique did the right thing by getting the Principal and the nutrition director to support her idea, she didn't build support within the school community before making a big change. Parents feel very possessive of their school while their children are enrolled, but eventually the kids graduate and the parents move on; teachers, however, may be at a school for decades, and they rightly expect that they will at least be consulted before major changes are made that affect their workplace. By not bringing her proposal to the teachers for their input, and not allowing them to express their concerns and fears about the program, Dominique set herself up for failure.

What should have happened: After getting the approval of the Principal and nutrition director, Dominique should have found out what the procedure is for getting onto the agenda of the school's regularly scheduled faculty meeting. Although schools may try to keep these meetings as short as possible, because teachers who have already put in a 7-8 hour day still have homework to grade and lessons to prepare once school is over, it should have been possible for Dominique to get 5 minutes on the agenda, to make her pitch and take questions. Just the fact that she brought the issue to the teachers and asked for their thoughts before moving forward would have been enough to get some of them to support her. She could have offered to return to a second meeting in a few weeks, giving the teachers time to discuss her proposal among themselves and formulate their questions.

The teachers had legitimate concerns, such as the loss of instructional time, the potential for mess, and the proposed menu; the meeting would have provided Dominique with an opportunity to gain their support by addressing those concerns. She could have offered to take pancake syrup off the menu; she could have asked teachers for their suggestions on when they wanted the custodian to come remove the breakfast garbage. She could have asked teachers if they wanted the option to opt out of the program by placing a red sign on their classroom door if Grab n Go was not welcome, and a green sign if it was welcome. In short, she should have involved teachers in the planning process, respecting their right to have some control over what happens in their classrooms, and incorporating their ideas into the final plan, so that when the Grab n Go started, the teachers were already invested, instead of feeling that it was something being sprung on them with no warning, and no chance to object.

Lesson: Make sure the whole community supports your idea, and get as much input as you can, from as many stakeholder groups as possible (parents, students, teachers, and other school staff) before moving forward with any change!

5. Don't put anything in writing that you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the local paper

Emily was leading her school's parent organization in a project to improve the cafeteria meals. It became clear to her that there was one person fairly high up in the school district administration who was trying to block what the parent group wanted to do. After a particularly unproductive meeting, Emily wrote a scathing e-mail about the administrator, detailing all of the barriers that the man was putting in her path, and demanding that something be done about the administrator, whom she described as a "child-hating junk food peddler and whore to the soda industry." She sent her e-mail to the administrator's boss, as well as to the Superintendent of the school district, the entire school board, her own Principal, all of the members of the governing board of her school's parent group – in short, to the whole known world. Emily received a prompt phone call in response from the administrator's boss. Much to her surprise and chagrin, the response was not to address Emily's concerns, but rather to explain in very terse language that the first order of business would have to be a public apology by Emily for her character assassination of the administrator. Meekly Emily complied, but even after she apologized, her original complaints of obstructionism were not given much weight, and she soon felt pressure to step down from leading her school's project. Her colleagues felt that she had become a liability.

What went wrong: Emily gave in to her emotions and allowed the issue to become personal, rather than professional. By attacking the administrator himself, rather than focusing on his actions, Emily gave up the moral high ground, and made herself sound like a bully and a loose cannon. Instead of positioning herself and her program as the victims of obstructionism, her rhetoric made the administrator look like the victim of a personal vendetta by an unstable parent. The actions of the administrator in hindering progress towards school food reform were completely lost in the drama of the attack, and in the end, the seriousness of Emily's complaint was almost entirely discredited by her failure to control her temper.

What should have happened: Emily never should have stooped to name calling; that is something to express in a heated phone call to a sympathetic friend, not in a written communication with strangers. Words once written and sent can never be retracted; Emily's first appearance before the Superintendent and the school board should have been as the calm and rational volunteer selflessly devoted to working for the good of the students. She should have presented her complaints with as little emotion as possible, including reasonable solutions for the problems she described. She should have made it easy for the top brass to support her program and embrace her solutions; instead, she made everyone want to distance themselves from her, and her program, as quickly as possible.

Anything written in the heat of passion should be left to cool off overnight and then read again with fresh eyes before sending. Always err on the side of caution; if you feel later that you didn't word your letter strongly enough, you can always send another one which is more explicit, but once you have sent off something potentially damaging, it is too late to ever take it back.

Lesson: No matter how justified you feel you are, don't give in to your baser instincts and let your emotions run away with you!

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