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How to be an advocate

By Margaret Brodtkin

I have had the privilege of being a professional child advocate in San Francisco for over 32 years. I have been able to do everything from persuading our Mayors to start children's programs they initially declared out of the question, to conducting a winning campaign for a first-in-the-nation children's funding policy. But these successes were built on early, incremental victories. In other words, I didn't start out being able to do any of these things.

Even though it was more than 30 years ago, I still vividly remember attending my first public hearing the second week on my job. It was the monthly meeting of the city's Juvenile Justice Commission, the body which determined the fate of all of the city's youth in the Juvenile Hall. I was the only member of the public in attendance, and one of the few women in the room. Members of the Commission treated it like a private club. They were shocked to see an outsider in their presence. They informed me in no uncertain terms (illegally of course – because of California's strong open meeting laws) that I could not speak. I snuck out of the meeting, feeling intimidated and humiliated. Pretty soon, however, I was returning, and not only demanding to speak, but bringing other concerned community members who also wanted to speak. Together, we demanded that public comment be heard before every single agenda item was voted on, and ultimately placed many important issues on the agenda ourselves. We questioned everything: why kids were locked up, why they were isolated in their rooms, why there was so little counseling or health care?

Over the course of a decade, things changed – counseling and other rehabilitative programs for incarcerated youth improved immensely; abusive staff were replaced with more skilled and sensitive workers; community programs were established as alternatives to detention; and a new accountability was put in place. These changes in children's lives would not have happened if we had not found the place where decisions were made, insisted on public input, and just persisted and persisted.

You too can do this; any level of participation contributes. You can go to one meeting, you can go to several, or you can spend years persisting. It would have made all the difference in the world to me if there had been just one more person at the first meeting I attended. That person could be you.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to experiment, practice, develop ideas and skills, and teach others how to influence the public policies affecting children and youth. I hope the lessons we have learned can help you stand up and speak out. Everything I have learned advocating for children's rights can be applied to advocating for better food both in schools and in the community at large.

Getting hooked in

The easiest way to get hooked in is to find an organization that is already working on the issues that concern you, and that will welcome your involvement. That may not be as easy as you would think, but it is well worth the effort it will take. Be prepared to make a dozen calls, and to have some organizations say there is no way you can participate. One tip: you might have to find an organization that is working at the state level on the issue of concern to you. This state level group can turn you on to the people in your community involved in the issue.

You may want to do something about an issue, like the junk food for sale in your school's vending machines, that you know no one else is already working on. Great! The easiest way to do this is to go to an existing organization – like the PTA, or school wellness council, and enlist the organization's help. It is not at all unusual for one person to bring a problem to a group and convince others to make it their issue. Try to think about what group might be directly affected by the problem you are trying to solve. Of course you can form your own ad hoc group. Put up a flier at the playground nearest your school, or post on your school's parent Internet chat board, and ask interested people to call or e-mail you. People in San Francisco do this all the time. If just three people call, you can give yourself an impressive-sounding name (Parents for Healthy Food) and have increased clout.

There's a good chance that you are not a joiner and that you want to get involved – but only occasionally, and on your own terms. No problem. If every community had only several hundred people in the same position you find yourself, many things would change. You may want to get on a mailing list of a national or state organization and make phone calls or send letters when you are able. You may be mad about some food-related issue in your school district, but only able to do one thing, like write a letter to the editor, testify at a school board meeting, or make a call to the Superintendent. As a professional advocate, I can tell you that it is a blessing to open the paper and see a letter to the editor that supports a children's cause, particularly one that comes from just an interested citizen.

Overcoming fears

It is only natural to assume that you can't speak publicly, but that's not true. I have been testifying at public meetings for over 30 years – and every single time I get nervous – every single time! But that doesn't stop me.

From my experience I can assure you that the most important things that get said at public meetings are said, not by experts or paid staff people, but by regular citizens – the people who will be impacted by the decisions that get made. These are the people that change the minds of the elected officials. These are the people who represent votes.

The importance of just being there and being counted

Some advocates never make a speech or give public comment. But they still stand up for kids. They attend meetings and cheer when the Mayor or the school board makes a commitment to kids; they hold a sign at rallies; or they wear a button and clap for pro-child speakers at budget hearings. These participants make a big difference. Not everyone has to be a leader. And many people don't speak the first time they go to a public hearing or meeting. But, being counted is very important.

When politicians walk into a meeting, the first thing they do is count. If you are there, you have sent a message to elected officials: people are listening, people care about this issue, people will hold you accountable.

Public hearings

One of the most common ways you can participate in civic life is to attend public hearings or public meetings of elected and appointed bodies. Public testimony is government's formal structure through which to gather input. Few people realize that most issues that they care about in their community have some kind of public body responsible for overseeing that particular issue. Very likely that body has regular public meetings that you could attend. Almost every community has an elected Board of Education, although most of the time few people attend – which is, of course, why you would have an impact if you did.

Most people don't know just how many official public meetings occur in their community – how many opportunities there are to participate. Every school district, large or small, has a budget and has to have some regular hearings on the budget. The budget is particularly important – it is the tangible statement of a community's priorities.

Listed below are some hints for good public testimony. But remember, something is better than nothing – and saying ANYTHING at all will make a difference. The less polished you are, the more elected officials will believe you reflect widespread public opinion, as opposed to the hired gun who reflects some kind of special interest.

Hints for public testimony

► *Short short short!* Public officials have short attention spans, and important points take little time to make. I recall a speaker who asked the Mayor to "drive his Cadillac childcare program at City Hall over to the poorest neighborhood in the city." Point made. Public testimony is usually time limited anyway – from two to five minutes. It's always good to know the time limit before you go – it helps you prepare. And remember, time goes very quickly when you are talking.

► *State the reason elected officials should care about your opinion.* Of course, the most obvious reason is that you are a voter. That works really well. If you are also a voter who talks to other people, that is even better. You can say that you plan to share the outcome with other families at your school, your neighborhood association, your PTA – whatever. And if you are a voter who also plans to follow up on what happens and then vote accordingly – that's power!

► *Present evidence of the problem.* Real life examples are usually best. Many people think they need to be experts in order to testify, or they need to present data. Often they throw away their three minutes of speaking time by presenting data that is commonly known, and fail to present their unique perspective or experience with the issue. People remember personal stories. Remember, former president Ronald Reagan changed welfare policies based on anecdotes – not objective information. Your story is more powerful than statistics. On the other hand, if you have information that is not commonly known or that you collected yourself, that is equally powerful. If your school has done a pilot project around school food, and you have data that supports a

conclusion like "Kids will choose cereal with less sugar if it is available", then say so. Props like charts and photos can add interest, if you have them.

► *Speak from the heart.* Too many people try too hard to disguise their feelings, thinking this makes them appear more objective. In fact, showing the depth of your concern makes you a more credible and compelling speaker.

► *Be clear about what you want.* Right at the start, let the elected officials know specifically what it is you want. An opening like "I am here to urge you to correct a grievous omission in the budget – funding better quality food for our children" sets the stage and lets people know exactly what needs to be done. It is also important to make sure that what you want is something the body you are addressing has the power to do. There's no point in going to your local town or city council and asking them to increase the amount of money the Federal government reimburses for a free school lunch. Having specific solutions in mind always works well, but not having them should never keep you away. After all, it is the job of the elected officials to develop policies that address the problems of their constituents. But if you can say, "I recommend that the city provide some extra money to the school meals program so that salad bars can be opened in all schools", that is probably better than simply articulating your frustration with the school meal program.

► *Don't be afraid of your anger – use it.* Most people are angry if they care enough to speak out. And yet they have been acculturated to believe that anger is bad. Controlled anger can be one of your most effective tools. It gives you power and can inspire the entire audience. If you can articulate what most people are feeling, it may be a little intimidating, but in a good way.

Meetings with elected officials or department heads

You might think that you could never have a private meeting with an elected official. You are wrong. Most elected officials know that their future rests on their relationship with the voters, which is why they devote so much of their staff's time to constituent services. Having elected officials hear directly from voters is a very, very important part of democracy. Even students can request and get a meeting with elected officials. Don't forget – youth are future voters, and politicians know that.

Getting in the door

This can be as easy as making a phone call to an office, or it can be so hard that it becomes a campaign in itself. Don't give up. In this case, the squeaky wheel ALWAYS gets greased. Some people spend up to six months negotiating for a meeting, but often find it has been worth the effort. Some tips:

► Put the request in writing. Be prepared to send multiple copies every time the staff person tells you they did not get your letter or e-mail.

► Follow up the written request with as many phone calls as it takes. Don't wait to be called back. After a polite amount of time (not too long), call again.

► If necessary, find an effective intermediary, someone who is more connected to the public official than you are, who can help you lobby for an appointment.

▶ Ask for an appointment for a group, rather than just for yourself. Politicians like numbers, and want to use their time efficiently.

▶ Be prepared for multiple schedule changes. Don't take it personally. Politics is a very unpredictable endeavor.

Face to face

▶ Be polite and respectful. Expect difficult questions and don't be defensive when they are asked.

▶ Go with a moderate size group (3-4 people) and share the responsibility for presenting the issue. If one person falters, another can step in. Also, with multiple presenters, there are multiple witnesses to the commitments that are made by the officials.

▶ Be clear about what you want. Bring written material to leave behind which summarizes your proposal.

▶ Try to get a specific agreement to follow up with the person you are meeting with. Make sure you give the e-mail address and phone number of the contact person for your group.

▶ After the meeting, write a thank you letter or e-mail, reminding the person you met with of the commitments they made to your group, thus reinforcing that person's positive response, as well as creating a paper trail for the future.

The attention span

Most public officials are very busy, and many (sad to say) are better talkers than listeners. You have two jobs at a meeting:

1. *Getting their attention.* They will be tempted with phone calls, incoming e-mails, their Blackberry or other electronic device, and numerous other distractions. You must get to the point as quickly and as dramatically as possible. You have about 90 seconds at the beginning of the meeting to pull them in. Practice a snappy attention-grabbing opening.

2. *Doing more talking than listening.* Having an elected official do most of the talking at your meeting when you are trying to share a problem is very common. Getting someone who talks for a living to listen (particularly a politician) is an art form. Some politicians lecture; some want to tell you their problems; some want to explain (and expect you to understand) why they can't help you. Sometimes this is flattering and it is always disconcerting. If you are ready for it, you won't be quite as manipulated by it. Without being rude, you must keep coming back to your issue, and not leave until you have said what you came to say.

Calling and writing

The two simplest and most common ways advocates can influence a politician are phone calls and e-mails. They are extremely important. Phone calls on issues are tallied and reported regularly to the public official. And since it takes time to write e-mails, particularly personal ones, they are much more rare than you think. I have known legislators who think two e-mails on an issue represent a call to action. E-mails are particularly effective because they create a

tangible document that can be easily circulated and kept on file for a long time, and (for most elected officials) they require a response.

Hints for quick and effective phone calls

- ▶ Put into your cell phone the phone numbers of your Mayor, legislators, school board office, and a few key city or school district departments. It is amazing how little time it takes and how easy it is to make a phone call. Not having the number readily available is often the major barrier.
- ▶ It's OK to just register your opinion. It's over in 60 seconds. You don't have to speak with the official. It is very rare to get him or her on the phone anyway. You don't have to answer questions; there will be no unpleasant encounters, even if you are calling to take issue with the official's actions. Public relations is the job of the people answering the phone. They will almost always be polite if you are. (Of course you can ask the official to answer your call. Don't be offended if the staff person responds instead. That's OK. The official will get the message.)
- ▶ Be brief and to the point: "Hello, would you give the message to the Board of Education that I strongly object to the schools serving highly sugared cereal in the school breakfast program. Thank you." That's it. It's over.
- ▶ Once you are sure that you are calling the right person and the right number on a given issue, share the number with some colleagues and friends, and urge them to make a quick call. Some of your friends may want to rehearse with you what they are going to say.

Hints for effective letters and e-mails

Personal letters or e-mails are best, but something is better than nothing. Two sentences, a post card, even a cut and paste e-mail. At the very least, your position will be noted.

In the best of all worlds, a good letter or e-mail is concise, documented by personal experience, and legible. Don't forget to state that you would like a response, and where to respond.

Use your message more than once. Computers make this simple. You can send it to multiple legislators, adapt it to a letter to the editor, and send copies to friends who also might feel compelled to write.

CCs (carbon copies) are an art form. Even more important sometimes than the letter recipient are the people who are cc'd on the message. If a department head knows the Mayor and the media have also gotten copies of your letter, think how much more likely he or she is to act! If the Mayor knows his or her political adversaries and other parents have been informed of the letter, all the better.

Utilizing the media

The media is a microphone and can be used effectively by parents and advocates. And nothing could be more important. Many policy makers believe that if something is not in the media, it

didn't happen. The media so dramatically expands the audience of people who will hear or see what you want to say that none of us can afford to ignore it.

Many people assume that they can have no influence on what they see, hear and read in the media. That is not true. Reporters are constantly looking for interesting stories, and are often more responsive to ordinary citizens than they are to experts, politicians, and advocacy organizations, all of whom they see as having an agenda. Surprisingly, many newspaper editors answer their own phone calls. And letters to the editor are widely read, particularly by decision-makers.

Note: The media likes to cover outraged citizens, particularly if they are taking on a bureaucracy in the name of their children. It creates a kind of "David and Goliath" story.

Know what inspires the media:

Conflict and controversy

Scandal and corruption

Horror stories

Inspirational stories

Unique approaches to solving problems

Media ideas for parents and advocates

► Politely complain about media coverage that is distorted or unfair. Call or e-mail the author of the story, the news editor, and the publisher.

► Plant a story with a local reporter. Watch for who covers what kind of issues, and identify the reporters interested in your cause or related causes.

► Write a guest editorial or letter to the editor. Read the paper to see what gets printed. What is the form, the length, the tone, the style? Use that as a model. If you can, talk to someone else who has gotten a letter published and find out how it was done. Don't give up if you do not get accepted the first time. Try again. And send the rejected piece to other papers.

Elections are opportunities to get involved

Elections should be democracy at its best, the ideal time to stand up and speak out. Here are some ways you can use elections to promote your cause:

► Attend a candidate forum and ask a question

► Call candidates' headquarters to get information on their positions; look for their website on the Internet to find out more about where they stand

► Ask for a meeting with the candidates – Not surprisingly, they are more responsive during an election than at any other time

► Have a group you belong to sponsor a candidate forum

► Volunteer for a candidate who supports your cause You will be rewarded after the election is over

Note: One reason politicians are often lukewarm about children's issues is that so few child advocates help them out during elections

► Write a letter to the editor about an issue on the ballot which relates to your cause

► Vote, and get a friend to vote!

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February 2011