



What to do when you win (or lose)

by Dana Woldow

After every campaign, whether you won or lost, take some time to review what happened and what can be learned from it. Say you were able to bring your issue to a vote at the Board of Education; the day after the BOE vote, try to talk with people who attended the meeting. Ask them about the speeches your side made, and also about the other side's arguments. Find out what they think worked and what could have been done better. Some important questions to ask include:

- ▶ Which of your points seemed to resonate best with the board members? Were certain members more impressed than others?

You will want to keep notes on board member reactions; it is valuable to know which members responded to which lines of reasoning. Maybe one member seemed most affected by discussion of impact on low income students; another member might have been most interested in whatever medical studies you were able to cite; still another might have focused most on the potential budget consequences of your proposal. You should be developing profiles of each board member which include their "hot button" issues; this will help you craft your arguments next time around.

- ▶ Did your speeches sound convincing and factual, or did it just sound like a lot of personal opinions unsupported by facts?

While it is important for you and your supporters to show that you care deeply about your issue, you never want to look like you are being carried away by emotion, or are being driven by ideology rather than facts. If anyone in your group displayed anger or another inappropriate emotion at the meeting, you need to make a note of that so that next time, you can urge that speaker privately to try to remain as calm as possible while speaking. Too much emotion just clouds the issue and makes it harder for the board members to focus on what the speaker is saying. It is easy to dismiss a presentation if the speaker seems to be ranting.

- ▶ Were there any points made by the other side which seemed to resonate with the Board? Did any of them resonate with your supporters?

If the other side made any valid arguments, you will need to brainstorm rebuttals to those arguments. Even if you won this round, some issues are never really resolved; they keep coming back year after year in slightly altered form. You may have gotten soda and junk food out of the cafeteria, but still find it cropping up all too often in classroom celebrations and parties, or at

fundraising events. You may have convinced the Board of Education to ban soda and junk food, but find a year later that, because of lax enforcement or miscommunication, it is still available at school. There are lots of reasons why you may have to fight every battle more than once. Keep working on your arguments even after you think you have won; you never know when you may need to bring them out again.

Think long and hard about the points the other side made, especially any points which your supporters privately acknowledge gave them pause. Is there another way to look at the issue, a way which is more in keeping with your position? For example, the other side might say, "There are students in high school old enough to drive, and even to join the military and fight and die for their country. Why are adults trying to tell them they can't even decide to buy a package of cookies at school?" Another way to look at that is to say, "A small number of students may be old enough to join the military, but some high school students are just 13 or 14 years old and still need adult guidance. Society makes rules to protect the interests of the weakest and most vulnerable, not to expand the rights of the most advantaged."

► If you didn't get exactly what you wanted, is there still a way to claim victory?

Often, when confronted with passionate speakers on both sides of a debate, a Board of Education will decide on a policy which is a compromise, giving each side some measure of victory. Instead of focusing on how the board did not agree with your position, instead frame the story around what you did gain. Maybe you wanted all junk food out of every possible venue at all schools - cafeteria, vending machines, fundraising sales, parties and celebrations, classroom incentives - but the board only agreed to limit the sale of such foods, while still allowing them to be given away for free at parties and celebrations, or by teachers as rewards. It is still a huge victory to have junk banned for sale; your group looks much more effective claiming credit for whatever progress you were able to make, rather than focusing attention on what you did not achieve. Let the world know that you are thrilled with the board's decision, and that going forward, you will work to gain their support for additional steps toward your ultimate goal.

Change is hard, and it rarely happens from one day to the next. Celebrate each success, no matter how small; learning from your defeats can help you achieve victory next time around.

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