

# ED327067 1990-12-00 Local Advocacy for Second Language Education: A Case Study in New Mexico. ERIC Digest.

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"You must have a shared vision. As long as there are self-contained classrooms, teachers are in a box, and there's no solution there."

Philip Schlechty, national leader in restructuring, quoted in the New York Times, August 28, 1990, section A, p12.

New Mexico second language teachers have been committed to sound, progressive education for a very long time. During the past eight years, however, this commitment has been expressed in an increasingly expanded and unified manner through the avenue of local advocacy. While classrooms are vital to students, schools, teachers, and society, the classroom walls should not limit educators' involvement in policies and practices that affect education. The educational community extends beyond the school building; it includes the community-at-large.

Efforts in local advocacy have brought the educational community together under the shared vision of improvement in educational policies and practices. In addition to the PRODUCTS of local advocacy--those accomplishments attained at the local and state levels--the PROCESS itself has produced many benefits. Language educators have formed alliances with members of the business sector, governmental agencies, school boards, professional and civic organizations, and the media. This forum has allowed language teachers to grow professionally and to give support to and receive support from the community.

## A CASE STUDY OF LOCAL ADVOCACY IN NEW MEXICO

The experience of the Albuquerque, New Mexico second language community is presented here as a case study of successful local advocacy.

"The Albuquerque Language Teachers Association (ALTA)" was formed in 1983 as the result of a national movement called Academic Alliances in Foreign Languages and Literatures, founded by Dr. Claire Gaudiani, currently President of Connecticut College, and now directed by Dr. Ellen Silber, Marymount College, NY. Academic Alliances are grass-roots, highly participatory associations of language educators from all educational levels working for the mutual professional development of members and for the promotion of foreign language education (Silber, 1987). In the Albuquerque collaborative, committed members of ALTA meet regularly to share information and ideas and to work together toward the improvement of their profession and their professional lives. The New Mexico Organization for Language Educators (NM OLE) is also based on this successful model.

During the formative stages, ALTA identified the need to assess the status of second language instruction in New Mexico and to bring second language education to the

attention of superordinates at the state level as an important agenda item. A small group of volunteers wrote a position paper presenting the issues. The paper was sent to four state-level education decision-makers who were invited to address the issues at a public panel sponsored by ALTA. The result was nothing short of amazing: the State Superintendent of Public Education commissioned the establishment of the New Mexico State Task Force on Modern and Classical Languages.

"The New Mexico State Task Force on Modern and Classical Languages," composed of seventeen members who represent the education levels, languages, and diverse geographic areas of the state, was charged with studying issues pertaining to second language and cultural affairs and making recommendations to state-level personnel. During its first three years, the Task Force conducted several state-wide surveys of practitioners and parents to assess needs. The survey results guided members of the Task Force in the development of student performance and teacher educational standards for second language study that subsequently were approved and adopted by the State Department of Education. The reinstatement of a position for a full-time state-level coordinator of modern and classical languages, an initiative that was proposed, nurtured, and closely followed by Task Force members during the legislative process that brought it about, led to the transformation of the Task Force into a state advisory council.

"English Plus Legislation." Not the least of the outcomes of the Task Force's advocacy efforts is the passage by the state legislature of a resolution on language rights that makes New Mexico the first state in the nation to take an official "English Plus" stance. English Plus "holds that the national interest can best be served when all members of our society have full access to effective opportunities to acquire strong English language proficiency PLUS mastery of a second or multiple languages" (EPIC EVENTS, March/April, 1988). This came about following a Joint National Committee on Languages meeting in Washington, DC, where it was suggested that local second language organizations pass English Plus resolutions. As a result, it was proposed that the State Task Force approach the state legislature with a proposal for an official resolution on language rights. Three Task Force members met with a member of the State Board of Education who is sympathetic toward second language issues and is the Board's official liaison with the state legislature. She steered the amateur lobbyists toward a supportive legislator (the Speaker of the House) and guided and advised the Task Force through the legislative process.

Although specific members of the Task Force spearheaded the legislative project, all members played a role (see de Lopez, Montalvo, & Lawrence, 1990). This local advocacy effort bore fruit as a result of the grass-roots nature of the task force, the tradition of participation and self-determination that members brought with them to the planning table, and the joy that all took in carrying out their tasks.

## STRATEGIES FOR CARRYING OUT SUCCESSFUL LOCAL ADVOCACY

The following strategies contributed to the success of advocacy efforts for second language education in New Mexico.

1) "Building a Community within the Ranks." This community should be united by a shared vision that offers a more permanent, creative, and broader bond than the desire to reach an immediate goal. The vision should be idealistic, ambitious, and positive. The ALTA community's vision was formally stated early on as a series of ten-year goals.

The advocacy community's adherents may be formally defined, as are members of ALTA, New Mexico OLE and the State Task Force; or they may include individuals who eschew formal organizational membership but support the group's underlying cause. The New Mexico community consists primarily of educators, from kindergarten through university, but also includes parents, state school board members, State Department of Education administrators, legislators, and community groups who share the vision of developing a multilingual society. A key commitment is the sharing of meaningful responsibilities among the adherents. At the same time, it is important that the community speak with a unified voice through an acknowledged spokesperson who may be elected, appointed, or employed in a leadership position.

2) "Identifying Specific Goals." The establishment of specific intermediate goals leading to the achievement of the group's ultimate goal facilitates the assessment of progress toward the final goal; focuses the group's energies; provides avenues for individual creativity, growth, and achievement; and reinforces the group's commitment to their community's shared vision. Once specific goals have been formulated, subgroups can take charge of working to achieve them. This broadens the involvement and commitment and taps the diverse talents and interests of community members.

3) "Identifying a Committed Action Group." Once a community has been formulated, a volunteer committee can take charge of tasks that lead to achievement of the community's ultimate goals. The most successful committees in New Mexico include members from a wide geographic area who are ethnically and linguistically diverse, hold varied educational positions, and are identified with a legitimate, recognized organization. Each member has a meaningful but manageable role to play in reaching the group's goal.

4) "Seeking Advice and Outside Support." It is invaluable to seek advice from experts beyond the immediate linguistic community. Some key issues might be: Who are the decision-makers ultimately responsible for the success of the advocacy goal? Are there political implications to be aware of? Do our proposed procedures sound effective? Are we observing protocol? Is the proposed timing realistic? Are there additional resources we might tap into for support? (These resources might include other groups potentially

affected by the project, such as the teachers' union, the business community, civic groups, legislators, parents, school administrators, and the media.)

Potential mentors for second language education advocacy groups include State Board of Education members, state legislators, advisors to the governor, school district superintendents, and professional association and community organization leaders with an interest in language education.

If a high-profile and influential supporter is available and willing, this individual can be an exceptionally effective spokesperson for a project. It adds legitimacy if advocates come from outside the language teaching profession and are not viewed as benefiting personally from the success of the project. These individuals can work behind the scenes, approaching decision-makers on the group's behalf, or can participate in a high-profile role to publicize a cause or activity.

5) "Utilizing Effective Management Strategies." Practices that have proven successful include the following: developing time-lines; identifying tasks and responsibilities and clearly delegating them; utilizing the diverse strengths of group members; taking advantage of a wide variety of resources; and identifying decision-making strategies. Perhaps the most important strategy is to maintain communication among all committee members. It is also helpful to identify and empower a coordinator for the project whose primary function is to inspire and support the work of subcommittees and members and to assure articulation among them.

6) "Maintaining Flexibility and a Positive Attitude." The goal of local advocacy is to educate and persuade. In the case of advocacy for second language education and for language policies that promote a multilingual society, the public must be persuaded to change its attitude about an issue--multilingualism--that is discomfiting and, perhaps, even threatening to some people. This requires patience, flexibility, creativity, and most of all, a positive philosophy on the part of local advocates. Rather than fighting against English Only, they should work FOR English Plus.

Any group working toward change does well to keep in mind that there are other points of view, and that those who hold them value them. It is important to listen, to be flexible, and to offer a positive alternative. It is better to make friends than to alienate those with different views: Today's opponents may be tomorrow's allies.

## A FINAL WORD

The efforts of local advocacy in New Mexico are characterized by a willingness to stretch in new directions toward a shared vision. As goals are achieved that were once thought impossible, it becomes easier to take risks. Fortunately, the successes counterbalance the setbacks, and, more importantly, lessons can be learned from both. There are no unalterable formulas nor any hard and fast rules for developing local

advocacy. Every project is different and requires its own particular strategies. From experiences throughout the various stages of development toward a strong coalition, the principles described above offer a practical, general guideline for all undertakings. For each project, however, it is important to tailor plans to meet the demands of the specific situation--its goals, the strength of the participants, and the various elements of the community setting. Although delays or serious obstacles may occur and the amount of planning and hard work may seem overwhelming, one overarching principle can restore energy to the group: There is great power in collaboration toward a shared, positive goal. Sometimes the biggest risk is just getting started. It is a risk worth taking.

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