

## *Literacy Advocacy Is About More Than Just Literacy*

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### **Abstract**

*The Advocacy Development Committee has a mission to “advocate about, advocate for, and support the importance of lifelong literacy learning in and through education.” Educators continue facing challenges. The committee explores ways that literacy educators can advocate, such as making self-care a priority, educating oneself, joining a professional organization, building relationships in the literacy community, and taking legislative action.*

**Keywords:** *literacy advocacy; lifelong literacy learning; book challenges; government*

During the 2022 TALE Conference in Plano, the Advocacy Development Committee met to discuss the challenges facing teachers today. The mission of the Advocacy Development Committee is to “advocate about, advocate for, and support the importance of lifelong literacy learning in and through education.” The committee builds alliances with other organizations and creates a network among literacy educators and other stakeholders.

The committee led a variety of deep discussions on what literacy educators were facing in their school districts including challenges with banned books, book access for all students, and the general pressures educators are facing daily.

Members realized that, even though they are literacy advocates, they have a responsibility to encourage all educators to be advocates. As it is commonly said among educators: We are all literacy teachers. This means other content area teachers should be aware that they need to be literacy advocates as well. The conversation was also a reminder that teachers need to advocate for themselves now more than ever before.

Teachers don’t come into the profession for the money or the glamor. Educators come to the profession to make an impact. They may have been inspired by another teacher growing up. They may have dreams of changing the world. They may simply be called to work with

children. However, those reasons are no longer keeping them in the classroom. Literacy teachers who have been at the front lines have faced challenges with book banning (Connolly, 2022; Free Speech Under Attack, 2022; Letter from Matt Krause, 2021), accessibility to a diverse range of books, and the debate between print versus digital books (Engbrecht, 2018; Wolf, 2019). These teachers are harassed and often feel as if defeat is waiting for them as they navigate through these rough waters. Many feel left out of the decision-making process. Let us not forget the challenges of online learning, pandemic related issues, and school safety. Not only have teachers faced seemingly insurmountable mountains of fears and challenges over the past several years because of COVID, digital-learning, recognizing trauma in students, school safety, and the added level of distrust from parents, they also are expected to go against what they believe is best for students: learning to think on their own. Books are not only important for literacy teachers and their students, they are a vital component of how to help learners expand their understanding of the world in a safe way.

According to a national survey conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2021, the data showed that one in every four teachers had considered leaving the profession (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Texas, like many states across the country, is struggling with teacher shortages. The Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA) surveyed members and found that 70% of their members were seriously considering leaving the profession at the end of the 2021-2022 school year (Robinson, 2022). The pandemic added to what teachers were feeling: overworked, underpaid, stressed out, and undervalued. The uncertainty and pressure so many felt as a result of pandemic teaching only made them more likely to retire or leave the profession entirely (NEA, 2022).

In addition to the pandemic, Texas mandated the HB3 Reading Academies in 2019 to improve

literacy across the state. The mandate required K-3 teachers and principals to complete the HB3 Reading Academies by the end of the 2022-2023 school year outside of their typical teaching day. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national measurement for student achievement in the United States, released state rankings based on each state's scores. Texas ranked 42nd in fourth-grade reading and 46th in eighth-grade reading nationwide (Texas Education Agency, 2019). There is no doubt that Texas must do better for students. However, the timing of implementation added more stress to classroom teachers. Now is a time more than ever that teachers need not only to advocate for their students but also to advocate for themselves as well. Yet teachers are busy, and advocating can be time-consuming. So what can teachers do?

As members of the TALE Advocacy Development Committee, we are working to find ways to help teachers across Texas understand how to advocate for the things they need in order to be successful educators as well as ways they can become more informed about the policies that affect them. As literacy educators and advocates, we often think learning how to advocate is similar to using Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978) with students: We can all reach the next level of understanding with a little help.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is based on the idea that a person's actual developmental level is determined by their independent level. The person works at a level that is attainable through facilitation and working with others in a collaborative setting. This means that literacy educators can reach a higher level of accomplishment when they have support. With the proper scaffolds, they can accomplish more rigorous and challenging experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Just like we help students learn to read or participate in deep analytical conversations relating to character and comprehension one step at a time until they are

ready to do it themselves, we believe we can all become better advocates for literacy education one comfort level at a time.

### **Make Self-Care a Priority**

Being a successful literacy advocate can be challenging. Whether you are advocating for books that represent the diversity of your classroom or going to a school board meeting to advocate for a book that is being considered for banning, you have to make yourself a priority. Practicing self-care is important to advocacy work. It means being aware of what is needed for personal balance. For some, that means going to as many school events as possible, being extra creative with hands-on activities for their students, and fully immersing themselves in the literacy community around the school. For others, it means giving 100% of their time and focus to the students in their rooms during work hours and then putting that away to focus on home and self-care. An alarming 75% of teachers have reported job-related stress, compared to 40% of individuals in other working fields (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Teaching should not be one of the most stressful jobs in the country; yet, because of the current political climate and expectations thrust upon educators, it has become one of the most stressful careers in the country. Making time for self-care is the first priority when advocating.

There are things that a teacher can do to make self-care a priority. First, begin by setting boundaries for yourself and others. If those boundaries include not taking a text or call after a certain time of day, then you must do it. You need to have that mental break away from the job. Spend time reading a good book, enjoy time with your family, or sit down and have a quiet meal. It is important to set boundaries between work and home.

How is this advocating? You may have to speak up to your school administrator who may text late into the night or a teammate who calls to ask

a question about a lesson or share his or her panic about a parent challenging the novel students are going to begin soon. It is also important to set the expectation that parents will not hear from you after hours. These small changes are a form of advocating. If you are not at your best, you cannot be the best for your students and family. Make your work/home balance a priority.

Next, make mental health a part of your conversation with others. School administrators and district leaders can take the lead by making time during the school year to check in on the mental health of their teachers. Provide professional development on teacher mental health, create a staff meeting that addresses the stress teachers are facing, or invite guest speakers to talk with teachers about self-care in the teaching profession. The goal is to create a community of support. This includes teachers finding someone to talk to about the stresses they are facing.

Studies have shown that teachers with strong relationships with their peers on campus are more likely to be pleased with their job, which results in lower stress levels (Aldridge & Fraser, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). So, take time before a team meeting to catch up with each other. That time should not be one of negativity and complaining that will drain the balance you have worked hard to achieve. It is important to build relationships with each other. Sometimes knowing you have someone going through the same challenges relieves some stress. The Advocacy Committee suggests ending meetings with laughter. Share the small moments that all teachers crave.

If teachers are not taking care of their own needs, which historically has been a downfall in our profession, they will always find it hard to be at their best in the classroom. That also means they will be less likely to advocate, or even care about advocating, for their classroom and students. They will simply be too worn out

emotionally, mentally, and maybe even physically. As a result, they cannot be the best literacy leaders needed in today's educational climate. Balance, like advocating, is different for everyone and should be a work of heart.

### **Educate Yourself**

Advocating is about more than being a voice in the room that is not afraid to speak up. It involves being brave enough to ask questions and challenge injustice. It involves reading widely and increasing your own literacy knowledge to be able to think critically, carefully, and deeply about the best ways to improve your ability to teach students using books and reading strategies. In an interview on the Oprah Winfrey show, Maya Angelou said, "Now that I know better, I do better" (Winfrey, 2011). As educators, we are constantly striving to do better, but we cannot do better unless we know better.

Fortunately, there is a plethora of professional publications available to us. The research that is available to educators on topics such as trauma-informed teaching, literacy, instructional practice, data-driven instruction, and even reports from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) helps us all to be more informed. The world has also offered us an abundance of podcasts focusing on education, literacy, literacy legislation, and instructional practices. If you lack sustained time to focus on a professional book, find a podcast or two that speaks to you.

Additionally, following groups like the U. S. Department of Education, Texas Education Association (TEA), and other focus groups on social media is an easy way to dive into the world of educational information. Following those groups does not mean you have to engage, but it does mean that you will have access to the way different groups in Texas and across the country are responding to issues relating to education, literacy, and literature.

Finally, educating yourself also opens doors to networking opportunities. The best advocates interact with those who have different points of view and are from different areas than they are, whether that means different districts, cities, counties, states, countries, or professional organizations. We cannot be effective advocates if we do not understand the perspectives of those advocating against what teachers understand as better practices for quality literacy instruction and literature.

### **Join a Professional Organization**

For those teachers who have found balance and are ready for their next level of advocacy development, the first step should be to find a professional literacy organization that speaks to them. The strength teachers get typically comes from other professionals in the field of literacy. More minds can develop wondrous ideas that can change literacy education for the better. Literacy professional organizations tend to offer a community in which the teacher can get information and protection about their rights, expand their knowledge, obtain professional resources, and relieve stress by connecting with other literacy educators. Each of us on the Advocacy Development Committee feels strongly that one of the ways we have grown into the educators we have become is because of the organizations we have been a part of, especially as members of TALE.

As literacy educators, attending ongoing professional development is a way for educators to reflect on and improve their practices. Literacy educators tend to feel empowered after attending professional development (Murray, 2010). This is why many professional literacy organizations offer professional development opportunities. It is not only a time for teachers to reflect on their practices, but attending these professional development opportunities also allows literacy educators to connect with others within the organization. Building relationships

within the literacy community is beneficial to educators.

The first step could be attending a literacy conference, like TALE's annual conference. Surrounding yourself with other literacy educators can be invigorating. Many literacy conferences offer social events where you can connect with others in the field of literacy. Attend one social event, even if it is out of your comfort zone. If attending a literacy conference is not in the budget or comfort level, join or start a book study with a group in your community. Book studies focused on a particular literacy topic open up great dialogue and allow reflection on literacy practices. Professional literacy organizations such as TALE often offer professional development opportunities through book study.

Not only does membership in a professional literacy organization help teachers to build their networks, but organizations also often have advocacy committees that are doing the work to help educate their members. Those committees are seeking out information that they believe their members need to know about literacy, whether it is legislative, local, or statewide. They work to listen to their membership and find literacy resources so that advocacy can be done. Additionally, professional organizations that focus on literacy understand the importance of literature and literacy education and will help members to focus on specific issues. The earlier you get involved in an organization, the quicker you will begin to grow your professional network and grow as an educator. Networking with other literacy professionals can help you find other educators, administrators, and legislators who are advocating for students' rights to read (International Literacy Association, 2018).

### **Take Legislative Action**

Many literacy teachers do not know where to begin when it comes to legislative actions. They

could be overwhelmed simply caring for and guiding the hearts and minds that are in their classrooms daily. They may not feel they have the knowledge, time, or professional security to explore all the legal language that goes into legislating, nor do they know where to find reliable, user-friendly information.

To help literacy teachers build their legislative knowledge, we offer some suggestions below.

- Set a Google Alert for any literacy topic that is important to you: Texas legislative education, HB 4545, Texas book challenges, state book review requirements, etc.
- Follow groups like Raise Your Hand Texas, Association for Texas Professional Educators (ATPE), Texas for the Right to Read, Texas Educators Vote, The League of Women Voters TX, and TXLege.
- When information is shared about a public education hearing, take the time to watch the recast of the hearing.
- Write or phone your local legislators about your concerns.
- Make connections with those who legislate in your area.
- Learn about your State Board of Education members, and find out their positions on literacy and literature in classrooms.
- Read your district policies so that you are fully informed from a local standpoint about what is expected when choosing or challenging literature.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Additionally, the TALE Advocacy Development Committee is working to build a digital library for members to use to continue to move up in their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) of advocacy understanding.

Understanding legislative actions does not mean that educators need to be at the state capitol with

signs in hand, although we encourage that if you are so inclined. Understanding legislative actions can be as simple as reading proposed bills and discussing those with friends and family. Help them to see your perspective as an educator. Encourage friends, family, and colleagues to read the books that are being challenged in order to have conversations about their merit. Invite those who are questioning the importance of how we teach students to read and write to visit your classroom and learn along with children to see the power of literacy education. Your knowledge and conversations regarding what is happening in the Texas legislature can help to spark a movement among those in your circle. Small movements that are

passionate, persistent, and strong create large ripples.

The primary goal of the Advocacy Development Committee is to help literacy educators discover their voices and find ways to feel comfortable working to improve the literacy lives of the students they serve. The committee welcomes new members to join and participate. The Advocacy Development Committee will continue working to help keep the members of TALE informed so you can all feel more prepared to speak out for quality literacy education, literature, and the rights of students to read and be seen in the books they read.

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