

STEM Talent Development

Advocacy: Taking STEM from Idea to Action



ADVOCATING FOR ADVANCED LEARNING or talent development in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is both timely and very important. The time is right to speak out on behalf of advanced learning in STEM areas as the emphasis in schools at all levels has been and continues to be on proficiency or

grade-level learning. It is very important to speak out on behalf of talent development as the future of society depends on providing opportunities for developing talent to optimum levels. The goal, in fact, is to remove the lid often placed on learning.

Some basic questions can set an advocacy plan for STEM in motion: Who? What? When? and How?

Who? The question of who should advocate points to each educator who is interested in excellence in learning in the STEM disciplines. Advocacy is a “do it yourself job.” That does not mean that one must advocate alone, but rather it encourages individuals to act and not wait for someone else to do so. Each person must assume the responsibility and then find others who are kindred spirits – others with whom to join in advocating for advanced learning opportunities in STEM disciplines. If the goal of the advocacy is at the state level, it is essential to identify potential stakeholders from various parts of the state to be involved in the advocacy. Professional organizations of engineers, businesses and companies with a STEM focus, and community groups promoting innovation are a few of the possible stakeholder groups who would be willing partners. If the advocacy goal is national, it is necessary identify fellow advocates at key

places around the country. National organizations of scientists and engineers, groups such as the National Association of Governors or the Chamber of Commerce, and businesses that depend on STEM talent would be possible partners when advocacy involves STEM initiatives and a focus on innovation.

What presents the second of the basic questions, and the answer to this question frames the advocacy plan. An important component of a successful advocacy campaign is a clear message, one that has been crafted to resonate with the decision-makers. The advocacy message must be crafted to articulate the goal. Messages need to be concise and easy for the all advocates

to communicate; when that is not the case, the message may change as various advocates talk with decision-makers. It is very important that advocates are communicating the same message. Messages change as they are passed along unless the original message is clear and easy for the advocate to share and the decision-maker to remember.

If the message concerns funding, then specify the amount and the purpose for which the funding will be used. For example, the message to the state legislature could be a request for nine million dollars to build a wing on to the academy to accommodate a greater number of students from all geographic areas of the state. The message must be complemented by a personal story that taps the emotions of the decision-makers as only good

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stories can do. Advocates might share stories to support the request that is the advocacy message. Two examples of such stories follow. A student from a rural part of the state graduated from the state math and science academy, became an engineer, and credited her advanced learning opportunities at the academy with pursuing that career trajectory. What a great message about the need to offer this opportunity to more well-qualified young people who currently apply to the academy but cannot come because of the limited capacity of the program! Another student from a lower-income family came to a magnet school and found the research fascinating, and this experience solidified his professional aspirations in an area of science about which he knew nothing prior to engaging in the research. Both stories communicate messages effectively. When possible, it is quite effective to have a person tell his or her own story. Advocacy messages must be credible—they must ring true. They must be crafted to communicate effectively. Crafting the message is an early step in the advocacy campaign.

When is the next question for advocates to consider when making an advocacy plan. The sooner, the better is the motto to use when it comes to timing an advocacy campaign. In fact, yesterday would be the best answer as effective advocates often have ongoing relationships with decision-makers. The key to success in advocacy is tied to knowing the individuals who make the decisions or perhaps knowing the people who know the decision-makers. Parents of current or former students can be effective advocates and may well have relationships with decision-makers. Former and current students are also effective advocates.

Another important part of the advocacy plan is to know the trajectory that the idea must follow from the beginning to the enactment of the idea in legislation, perhaps in the budget but maybe in enabling legislation. It is very important to know what group in a legislature will be making the decisions that will determine the fate of the advocacy plan. It is necessary to know which legislators serve on the committees that will consider the issue for which the advocacy plan has been developed. If the issue being advocated requires inclusion in the budget, it must get approval in the appropriations or budget committee.

Other STEM advocacy goals may need approval of the education committee to move to the full house or senate. The timing for advocating is incredibly important. It must start early and be ongoing.

After knowing the path the initiative must follow, the first step to take is to meet with key members of the specific committee that handles the legislation of the type being presented. If the members of the committee express interest, the next step is to schedule a time to present the initiative to the entire committee. Approval at the committee level is required before the legislation moves on to the full house or senate.

How should the advocacy carry on? Here it is important to recognize characteristics of an effective advocate.

One: The advocate must be a good communicator. Communication, of course, is listening as well as talking. He is able to articulate the message and to support it with information and stories.

Two: The advocate must be resilient. Although reaching the advocacy goal quickly is desirable, it does not always happen that way. It is often necessary for her to advocate, evaluate advocacy efforts, and then advocate once more.

Three: The advocate must be willing and effective in working with others. Numbers count in advocacy. Certainly the message is far more likely to be communicated effectively if the idea is important to lots of people, so it is important to find others who share a vision. Getting others to coalesce around an advocacy message is important.

Four: The advocate must harness social media to create interest and support for the advocacy goal. The ability to reach a significant number of people quickly describes the advocacy potential of social media.

Five: The advocate must be familiar with the legislative process and the responsibilities of various legislative committees, as well as know which legislators are in leadership positions in each house. This information helps the advocate negotiate the journey of the idea (the initiative) through the legislative process.

Six: The advocate must remain alert. The proposed legislation may seem to be going smoothly through the

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legislative process, but it is so easy to get way-laid along the way. It is essential to be in the room when decisions are made or to have someone in the room who can text, call, or email to keep you up to date on what is happening on the floor of the House and Senate.

The process of taking an idea through the legislative process is seldom quick, but rather it is one that requires planning and persistence. It begins with an idea that becomes the centerpiece of the advocacy. Momentum builds when kindred spirits join together and share the carefully crafted message. Negotiating the legislative process works best when it is well planned. If success is not the result, advocates move forward and work to build support for the next legislative session. On the other hand, the advocacy initiative may result in the passage of legislation or the inclusion of needed funds in the budget that is adopted. Either way, advocates thank all partners and legislators who helped, and they continue to build relationships – the key factor in moving an initiative from an idea to action for talent development in STEM.

— *Julia Link Roberts, Ed.D.*

A Special Request

To help decision makers understand the need to provide specialized services to gifted and talented students, it is important to share stories and examples of how programs – and specialty schools such as those that are part of NCSSSMST – have made a difference in the education success and life success of program and school graduates.

Many elected officials believe that high-ability students will succeed, even in the absence of the opportunities, challenges, and camaraderie that these programs offer. It is important to dispel that myth with your stories that link your specialty school experience directly to your ensuing post-secondary and career paths. I know that many readers could tell stories of wasted academic time prior to attending specialty schools, or the moment when the light bulb went on in what would become your chosen profession, or some of you could share examples of mentors whose encouragement led to remarkable achievements at a young age – paving the way to selective university programs and other opportunities.

If you're willing to share your story, please send me an email at julia.roberts@wku.edu with a brief summary. I'll follow up with a short questionnaire so that we can capture similar information from each of you that will illuminate for others the value of our specialty schools!