

Advocating For Your Needs

by Meg Ferguson, Executive Staff Officer, Professional Learning

“Wow! Your room is really cold!” exclaimed the principal in surprise. It shouldn’t have been a surprise, it was mentioned to him—twice.

Once determined that the principal may have other important things to attend to, he was invited to personally experience the below zero wind tunnel created when the band room door opened. Well, it worked. It was fixed by the next day.

Speaking up for one’s needs as a teacher until successful is easier for some than others. It could be as seemingly small, as needing white board markers, to significant issues such as safety concerns and workload issues. Being the one to speak up can make a difference. Collective voice is even more powerful. “Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change,” writes Brené Brown.

The goal of this piece is to help those who are less comfortable doing so. Without addressing specific needs, the tips are general and meant to be adapted to work in whatever situation is coming to mind for the reader.

Advocacy in an education context

Education is ever-evolving—science and personal experience teach us more each year in how to better serve our students. Teachers are not only agents of change in public education, but in society as a whole. We must let decision-makers know when something is not working as well as what we need to do our job to the level that both we and our students deserve.

Why? Because teachers are the experts in what our classes need.

Why are people uncomfortable doing so?

As brought forward at the RRC Chairs’ and Local Presidents’ conference earlier this month, members can feel reluctant to speak up for a variety of reasons including fear of reprimand, confrontation avoidance, or even potential stigma about a person’s skills. Ultimately, if a member is actively addressing safety or learning issues as well as seeking additional support from instructional leadership, they are fulfilling their role effectively.

As encouraged by NSTU’s Executive Director, Steve Brooks, it is vital for members to use the rights that have been won through collective agreements or legislation—and it would be a powerful thing. The more members speak up, a culture of doing so will develop.

Yes, there can be bureaucratic barriers, and yes, it may not work first time, or the second time, but please don’t let that stop you. “The courage to be vulnerable is not about winning or losing, it’s about the courage to show up when you can’t predict or control the outcome,” continues Brown.

How do I speak up?

This will depend on your communication style, as well as what the need or concern is and so the steps are flexible. Use or adapt the suggestions helpful to you.

Step 1: Build trust

Cultivate trust, credibility, and mutual respect through open communication, active listening, and collaboration with school leaders and colleagues (and even your MLA). This is ongoing effort.

Step 2: Identify the root

What is at the core of the issue? It can be more efficient to address than the various symptoms. Talking it out can help—perhaps there is a different solution than what you are imagining.

Step 3: Gather Evidence

Support your advocacy with data, resources, examples of practical application or research to illustrate the importance of your cause. What have you tried? What has worked or not worked?

Step 4: Be Strategic

Prioritize your most important need(s). Identify who can help and who can address or fix the issue. Know your audience. When the student contact time was going to be reduced for a specialist subject in a particular regional education centre, the member contacted multiple levels and departments to address it (and it worked). If it is something less urgent, strategically figure out who can make it happen.

What to say

Once you have set a meeting time, or decide your approach to addressing the issue, this is a suggested plan for preparation adapted from *The Coaching Habit* by Michael Bungay Stanier.

- A. Thank you for meeting with me on this important issue. (Taking the time to consider my email.)
- B. What you are hoping to achieve with the conversation.
- C. The core of the issue
- D. Evidence, data, impact (Include what you have tried so far where applicable)
- E. Repeat B and let the conversation flow.

Communication Tips

1. Clarity is key
2. Know your strengths
3. Keep it focused and professional

Preparing what you want to say can help keep you on track and prepare you mentally as well as emotionally. Include messaging that this will make a positive impact on school culture and student learning. Practice with a friend or rehearse it a few times, it will get easier.

Myra H. Strober from the School of Education at Stanford University and organizational change consultant Jay M. Jackman suggest finding a group of like-minded people and then have one of those people join you for your conversation (Reardon).

Cautions

By waiting too long, some folks become so frustrated that they may react in a way that is not comfortable for them. First, it's okay to cry, be upset, get mad. It means you care. If you are afraid of this happening when advocating, then draft an email, re-read it the next day or ask a trusted friend to make sure you are maintaining a respectful tone while communicating your frustration/need.

Make sure there is enough time to address the issue, as well. Don't assume they already know.

If not for you, do it for someone else

To help get past the barrier of discomfort in speaking up for yourself, Adam Grant suggests that if you won't do it for yourself, do it for your students, for your family, for your colleagues. If we do not let people know there is an issue, how can it be resolved?

Remember, advocating for your needs isn't just about self-care; it's about ensuring you have the support to be the best educator you can be. When you speak up to improve working conditions, you are improving the public education system for yourself, your students, and colleagues.

And – NSTU staff are here to support you in your efforts.

References:

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