

ADVOCACY LESSONS LEARNED

My political awakening began February 22, 2001 when the Arkansas Senate passed Senate Bill 417 entitled "The Spanish as the Primary Foreign Language of Arkansas Act," sponsored by Senator Jodie Mahony. Twice before the Arkansas Foreign Language Teachers Association (AFLTA) had taken a position against this bill and succeeded in having it withdrawn. This year, it was quietly brought back to the Senate Education Committee where it was passed on February 22 and sent on to the Senate floor where it also passed within 24 hours. It had gained support, and we soon learned that two officers on AFLTA Executive Committee had endorsed the bill in the Senate Committee. The current AFLTA board had no official knowledge of the progress of the bill and, therefore, no opportunity to form an official position statement. Although I would have preferred that the AFLTA Executive Committee be involved, as President of the Arkansas AATF Chapter, I accepted the challenge to organize and lead an opposition. Without any knowledge of the political arena, I plunged in. Our target was the House Committee. I took the following actions:

(1) Organized an e-mail and letter campaign soliciting about 75 French teachers;

(2) Prepared and mailed information packets to members of the House Education Committee.

(3) Sought and received letters supporting our opposition from both the National AATF Executive Director Jayne Abrate and from ACTFL Executive Director Ed Scebold;

(4) Solicited individuals to testify with me before the House Education Committee in Little Rock.

On March 8, after postponing his presentation a week when he discovered the presence of our opposition, Senator Mahony presented his bill to the House Education Committee. Testifying in opposition were three foreign language educators (two French, one Spanish), the Arkansas Education Association President, and a representative from the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators. Testifying in support were the abovementioned AFLTA officers and a representative from the Arkansas Department of Education. The bill was defeated by a voice vote.

However, a bill can be brought back two more times to the committee. Knowing the years of experience of Senator Mahony, we kept a vigil on the House Education Committee Agenda on the Legislature's

Web site. The day after our state conference, it was back on the agenda. With a weekend to reorganize, I went back to my same e-mail lists plus the German, Japanese, and Latin contacts I had met through the first effort, telling everyone to please send their messages of opposition one more time. I was convinced that if people did not speak up clearly, the committee might just yield to this influential Senator. More people were needed to testify. We decided that it would be more effective if the AATG President took my place, assisted by two retired professors. One more letter, this time from JNCL/NCLIS, was submitted as written testimony. The bill was defeated for the second time, but we did not sleep well until the legislative session was over, for fear that the Senator would go back for a third attempt.

Several lessons come to mind in retrospect. You cannot wait for someone else to fight your battles for you. If you believe in the cause, do not sit there hoping someone else will take care of it. Recruit others for a team effort. It is not a job to undertake singlehandedly. A coalition of diverse groups multiplies the effect. It is important to convince those with influence to join your cause. And NEVER listen to those who say "It is a done deal." My response was simply, "I'm defending what I believe in, no matter what the odds." I was proud of that. It is time to build grassroots support to influence our state and federal lawmakers if we want to see quality foreign language education continue for future generations.

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TECHNIQUES FOR A GRASSROOTS PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

- I. Create a file of contacts to be on your regular mailing list, including e-mail addresses.
 - A. Your school administrators, counselors, sponsors of Student Council, Beta Club;
 - B. Your district administrators and local Board of Education;
 - C. The president of the parent-teacher organization and parents of your students;
 - D. The local mayor and newspaper editor;
 - E. Your state senator and representatives;
 - F. Your Congressmen/women;
 - G. The members of the State Board of

Education;

- H. A contact at the State Department of Education;
 - I. A contact at the state teacher's organization;
 - J. A contact on the Education Committees in your state legislature;
 - K. A contact at a statewide newspaper;
 - L. A media (TV/radio) contact;
 - M. CEO's of French-based companies in your state;
 - N. The French Chamber of Commerce, the regional French, Swiss, or Belgian Consulates, the local Québec Delegation;
 - O. The president of groups such as an *Alliance Française*, French Club, university French departments, exchange organizations;
 - P. Civic groups: Rotary International, the Chamber of Commerce, Pilot Club;
 - Q. Local travel agents.
- II. Set up a schedule of mailings to mark major events in the year.
 - A. National French Week: Give them advance information in a newsletter, then invite officeholders to participate as judges, presenters, or to make a proclamation.
 - B. State Foreign Language competitions: Feature the students involved, then explain the kinds of skills required with a few examples.
 - C. National Foreign Language Week: Include activities of your combined foreign language department.
 - D. Other?
 - III. Decide on the format of your communiqué or newsletter.
 - A. Number of pages, title, font, etc.;
 - B. Estimated budget and sources of funding (This is where the e-mail addresses may help out);
 - C. Shop for an inexpensive digital camera;
 - D. If you want to establish a Web site also, estimated cost of professional (or university student) assistance.
 - IV. Assemble a team to help with labor and expenses; establish a timeline.
 - A. Labor: parents, students, colleagues;
 - B. Expenses: CEO's of French-based companies, local organizations, local banks;
 - C. Technical assistance: local college students, businesses;
 - D. Decide on whether you will need an editor or can use student helpers.
 - V. Visit and call targeted Individuals who

- can promote good foreign language policies for state.
- A. Invite them to attend and/or participate in an event along with parents and others from list of contacts above.
 - B. Recognize each official who attends and present awards to others providing monetary and volunteer support.
 - C. Ask for assistance from the top list of contacts.
- VI. Use free advertising for events.
- A. Newspapers' calendar of events;
 - B. Radio and TV shows highlight coming events;
 - C. Local, regional, and state educational publications.
- VII. Give PR token favors at events.
- A. Key chains, pens, notepads make your organization visible a little longer.
 - B. Ask businesses to help subsidize cost.
- VIII. Build bridges in local elementary schools where we want to start foreign language education.
- A. Bring programs for entertainment. Think holidays, music, dance, fairy tales.
 - B. Establish mini-courses by advanced students in a grade level, e.g. third year.
 - C. Offer opportunities for elementary teachers to learn language, too.
- IX. Have state foreign language organizations (or a coalition) write an advocacy statement.
- A. Statement goes to all officeholders, board members, teachers, educational groups and publications.
 - B. Policy proposals for state or local application need a coalition of diverse voices from community, parents, students, officials, board members, teachers.
- X. Build a permanent coalition for better foreign language policies.
- A. French teachers will benefit from joining forces with teachers of other languages, teachers at elementary and college levels as well as building alliances with other stakeholders in education: parents, community leaders, board members, officials, students.
 - B. Select three spokespersons to jointly address your proposal.
 - C. Publicize your position: letters to editor, guest editorials.
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