

Advocacy in Language Education

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A Guide for Administrators**

Language educators have serious public relations problems. This is because the views of professionals are often very different from personal theories held by the public.

The “commonsense” views of the public have won all recent battles. Despite consistent evidence supporting bilingual education, voters in three states voted to dismantle it. Despite substantial evidence showing the limits of phonics and the power of real reading, intensive systematic phonics is strongly supported by state departments of education and the federal government.

In addition, there is the familiar problem of dealing with media. In general, reporters, often overworked and faced with deadlines, cannot study educational issues in depth, and get their information from other newspapers, press releases, and conservative think tanks (Stafancic and Delgado, 1996).

But it is possible to inform the public and even change public opinion. And it is clear that this will never happen if we don't try.

Here are some steps we might take:

STEP ONE: Get informed.

Many educators feel that they are too busy to read professional literature, and/or don't know where to find it. But we can inform ourselves quickly and easily, thanks to some high-quality websites and reader-friendly books (see appendix for a list of websites).

STEP TWO: Share with allies.

If our colleagues are not aware of what we and others are doing, there is no hope. All too often professionals find out about significant events only after they have appeared in the press, and have been misrepresented.

In sharing information, we discover groups who either already hold the similar views and/or are open to and ready for our point of view. This results in rapid diffusion of ideas. Similar battles are being fought in different areas of education, and the arguments and data that help in one area can help in another.

Sharing ideas these days is easy, requiring only forwarding items to others electronically.

STEP THREE: Express your own point of view, from your own experience and expertise.

To paraphrase Susan Ohanian, the public needs to hear from those who have been in the classroom, not from those who have never in their lives been shut up in a room with a large group of seventh graders for a full day.

I suggest you write (or talk) about any issue in which you, as a professional, have knowledge that the

public does not have and needs to have.

Publish your opinions anywhere you can. At least tell us, your colleagues, by posting on listservs. Others will learn from your ideas and might be able to use them. There are of course other possibilities: letters to the editor, op-eds, blogs, articles in professional journals, general-interest magazines, newsletters, etc.

Each person has to discover what is comfortable for them. I like to write journal papers and letters-to-the-editor, and I stick to these formats. For some reason, I find it hard to write op-eds or “general interest” articles. (Thomas Feyer, letter editor for the New York Times, has provided some good advice on writing letters-to-the-editor (Feyer, 2004).

Right now, the public is only hearing from amateurs with little or no experience in educational practice or research. The public needs to hear from the real experts.

The acceptance of new ideas depends on a variety of factors: One factor is obvious – how much people know about the new idea. Rogers (1983) notes that we see no acceptance of new ideas until potential “adaptors” have a minimum amount of information. But once a certain threshold is reached, increases in information result in substantial increases in acceptance of the new idea (p. 235).

We are, in my view, far below the minimum. Getting information to the public, and eventually to opinion leaders, is a task we must all take part in.

Websites:

1. General news on education: <http://susanohanian.org>. For a different point of view, see <http://educationnews.org>.
2. Testing and standards: <http://susanohanian.org>, <http://www.alfiekohn.com>.
3. Bilingual education: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/>
4. Language acquisition and literacy: <http://www.TRELEASE-ON-READING.COM>;
<http://www.sdkrashen.com>.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/opinion/23READ.html?ex=1098781586&ei=1&en=167fb22576f65f52> accessed October 17, 2004
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