



# ADVOCATING ADVOCACY: RAISING VOICES TO MAKE CHANGE

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High school teacher Michele Turner Bernhard was driving into work one morning when she caught part of a National Public Radio series on the theme of “grit” in education. Thinking that the piece reflected an odd “circular logic” that did not necessarily sit well with her based on her experiences as a teacher, she felt the need to write about those experiences.

Bernhard, of Northampton, Massachusetts, turned to a unique publishing partnership between the Western Massachusetts Writing Project and a local newspaper, the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*. The feature, called *Chalk Talk*, provides a monthly space for local educators to get

published and be read by a wide audience of thousands of readers.

Using the newspaper column as a lectern, Bernhard made this astute observation about the students she sees coming through her door every day:

Most of our struggling students come from families living in poverty. These kids harness their “grit” to get themselves to school each day, where they are told that hard work is rewarded with good grades, college, and a successful job. But there needs to be more for them after graduation than a minimum wage job that doesn’t cover the bills, or impossible

college loans. The language we use as educators matters. The term “grit” implies something is missing in our students, not in our education system. Similarly, the term “achievement gap” implies that the education system can fix what is a growing socioeconomic divide. (2014b)

Across the country, it remains difficult for teachers, school librarians, and other educators to find their voices amid the clatter of news stories of teacher evaluations, Race to the Top initiatives, Common Core shifts, next-generation standardized testing, and using data analysis to guide instruction. Some educators fear reprisals for speaking out in public forums. Others find that concentrating on their own classrooms gives them power they don’t have on the public stage. Still others are uncomfortable with the changes afoot, and, perhaps, particularly if they are veteran educators, are waiting for “this, too” to go away, if past education reforms are any indication.

Yet advocacy for education is a key component to engaging the public in understanding the role of education—of our classrooms, our libraries, the impact that top-down education reform movements have on the lives of children. Voices of teachers and school librarians, and others with a foothold in education, need to be heard.

In 2013 twenty-thousand U.S. teachers responded to a survey (sponsored by Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) that covered a wide spectrum of topics. Just over a quarter (26 percent) of all teachers surveyed reported that they did not feel their voices and their concerns were being heard “at all.” That number shifts lower as the question narrows to being heard

locally as opposed to statewide and nationally. The larger the lens, it seems, the less satisfied teachers are about whether their concerns about education are being considered by policy leaders and the public.

Luckily, education professionals have more opportunities than ever before to speak up and add their perspectives to the discussions about the future of schools via online and more traditional platforms. Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and other social-networking spaces are as valuable as op-ed letters to local newspapers, and in some cases, cast a wider net for an audience.

Steven Zemelman, an educator in Chicago and director of the Illinois Writing Project, has been working tirelessly to provide a platform for teachers across the country to find their voices and speak out about what is happening in their classrooms, schools, communities, and education circles. Zemelman, along with Harry Ross and Marilyn Hollman, curate a site called Teachers Speak Up <<http://teachersspeakup.com>> as a way to provide a publishing space for educators. The trio curates blog posts, hosts podcast discussions, connects with other education organizations, and mentors and coaches individual teachers. Zemelman annually facilitates roundtable discussions at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference, encouraging educators of all stripes to find ways to be heard by a larger audience than their school communities.

“There’s so much negative talk and sheer misinformation about the state of public education in this country, and a counter-narrative is needed, not just in blogs that other teachers read, but in the wider

## INDIVIDUAL TEACHER-WRITERS: CONSIDERATIONS

- Understand your newspaper, its geographic area, and its audience.
- Make connections with reporters and editors (e-mail works fine).
- Look for the hook of a story and pitch it that way to the newspaper.
- If it is a feature story, make sure an interesting visual element can be tied in. (Newspaper editors love pictures of students doing things.)
- If it is a commentary or opinion piece, start with a vignette or narrow look inside the learning experience, and then branch out to larger point.
- Accept that editors might cut your piece for length. If that is unacceptable or non-negotiable, make your stance clear to the newspaper.
- Try to keep the tone of the writing positive.
- Be sure to follow up with a thank-you to newspaper contacts when your piece gets published.

## ORGANIZATION: CONSIDERATIONS

- Establish a partnership/communication with an editor at the newspaper.
- Suggest a “funnel effect:” We find teachers who will write. You get their pieces published. Win-Win.
- Reach out to teachers in your networks and ask them to contribute. If you wait for them to approach you, you may wait a long time. If they say, “I don’t have time right now” (and they will), pencil them in for a future date. But don’t pressure them.
- Flatter teachers in a positive way: what they are doing is important and meaningful to a wider audience.
- Be ready to help brainstorm ideas with teachers and edit their writing before publication, if necessary.
- Be sure to follow up with a “great job” note to the teachers, a thank-you to the newspaper, and a “check out what your teacher is doing” to school administrators.

*Adapted from a roundtable presentation by Kevin Hodgson at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference, Fall 2013*

## MAKING YOUR ARGUMENT HEARD

- Do your research and be prepared.
- Find some common ground with key advocacy groups.
- Be positive about your accomplishments.
- Stay clear and focused on your talking points.
- Consider your audience and address their concerns.

media,” Zemelman has asserted when asked about how the need for *Teachers Speak Up* became evident to him and the others. “Who better to provide this than the educators who are being blamed? But they need to do this not in an excuse-making mode, but accompanied with positive stories of challenge and success with real kids” (2014).

Meenoo Rami, author of the new book *Thrive: 5 Ways to (Re)Invigorate Your Teaching* (Heinemann 2014), and a high school teacher at the Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, has long been interested in helping educators find their voices, both with traditional media and technology. She shows educators ways to tap into social media and beyond. Rami facilitates a very popular weekly chat on Twitter called #engchat <<http://engchat.org>>, where teachers, librarians, and other educators use the opportunity to connect, share, and advocate for their students in meaningful ways beyond the electronic sphere.

Rami says it is important that the views of educators be valued across the spectrum—especially in the current changing climate in education, change that is being driven top-down by the federal government and by various private

interests with deep pockets, such as Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and others with funds and grants that seem to drive policies.

“I am trying to make the point, that teachers’ voices, in fact, matter, and if we go public with our hopes, joys, and struggles in our practice, then maybe, just maybe, we can reclaim some of that conversation,” Rami says. “We can actually begin a dialogue that is productive with parents, policy makers, and politicians. Teachers also have the responsibility to speak up for their students because there is inequity, racism, and neglect rampant in our education system” (2014).

Bernhard, whose response to “grit” was grounded in her own classroom experiences, noted that her column in the newspaper sparked discussions in her school, as well as out in the larger community, and she feels empowered by the way writing publicly about the role of education has engaged her in many conversations since then.

Writing about what the classroom looks like “gets dialogue going,” Bernhard said, “and it lets me think about the big picture. Publishing my views also allows others who are not lucky enough to be teaching get a little window into public schools, and that can make a positive difference” (2014a).

As educators, we need to more actively invite members of the public and government officials into our classrooms. Make it personal. Show the learning. Forge connections with those outside of our traditional education circles. Dialogue, as Bernhard notes, is important if we want to shore up support for our education systems in times of crisis and need and if we want to positively impact the lives of our students. Teaching can often be an isolating

experience, yet there are more ways than ever to extend your voice, whether it is through your local newspaper (see sidebar), on the Web, or within your own community.



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Massachusetts, and technology liaison with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project. He coauthored the book *Teaching the New Writing: Technology, Change, and Assessment in the 21st-Century Classroom* (Teachers College Press 2009) and blogs regularly at Kevin’s Meandering Mind <<http://dogtrax.edublogs.org>>. He is also active on Twitter as @dogtrax.

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