

# ADVOCATING FOR LITERACY AND LEARNERS

One of the goals of a literacy program is to empower its learners. To meet this goal, literacy staff often must assume an advocacy role on behalf of their learners.



Learning doesn't take place in a vacuum. Learners lead complex and sometimes troubled lives—lives that might be compounded by social injustices—that can interfere with their learning. Learners may believe they are powerless to influence changes or may not know the steps to take to do so.

Creating an environment that addresses the whole person creates more open and effective learning. Fostering discussion of learner's concerns and barriers to learning can provide compelling curriculum topics, texts, and activities. Through advocating for their students, staff members provide the model learners need as they become their own advocates.

A word of caution: being a model advocate does not mean invading learners' privacy. The idea is to develop awareness of community issues and resources, along with advocacy skills, so that you can be effective when asked.

## ESSENTIAL STEPS

- Be accessible, available and prepared to listen. Each staff person should interact, on a comfortable level, with learners.
- Train individual tutors to be more than teachers of reading—they need to understand what that means for them on a personal level. They also need to know how to access community services and other resources their learner might need.
- Be aware of issues and events in your community that might affect your learners, e.g., welfare reform, seasonal employment opportunities, summer programs for children.
- When you act as an intermediary between learners and other agencies or resources, be sure to involve the learner in the process. Tell the learner the language you intend to use. Engage the learner in all steps of the process—making a phone call, finding the location of the agency on a map, etc. All of this prepares learners to advocate for themselves.
- Build coalitions and relationships with people and organizations that will help you advocate for your learners. They, in turn, will advocate and support the work you do.
- If you decide to become actively involved in an issue, be prepared to devote additional time and resources. It could become more involved and more complex than you originally anticipated.
- Document all your advocacy activities, including the failures. This will strengthen your own position, increase your understanding of the issues so you can better speak to improve them, and will provide curriculum materials to help teach learners to be their own advocates.
- Share what you know with others. Hold workshops on advocacy for tutors and learners—let them in on the process.

- Encourage learners to become advocates for themselves and other learners.

## SUMMARY

As an example, our library advocated that the County Welfare Plan add literacy to their acceptable list of work-related activities. Without the library's advocacy, literacy education would not have been a choice for CalWORKS participants.

There is danger in playing the advocate only if we alone decide we know what is best for a learner. If the library literacy environment is open and supportive, the learner will come to you: to help with the paperwork to move his son out of an abusive home and come live with him, to get the tutoring help her daughter needs in school, to collect unpaid wages, to help her keep her grand kids out of jail, to write a speech about a parent's responsibilities, to figure out a budget, to make sure he is not being cheated, and on and on. When you are able to take a learner through the process step by step, then you will have helped the learner become his or her own advocate.

For more information, contact:

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ALA American Library Association

Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) is an initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

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