

## The Politics of Adult Education

**Art Ellison**

New Hampshire Department of Education

One of the realities of working in a field for many, many years is that you accumulate a huge amount of information – some of it useful, some not so much so. In this article I will try to extract some wisdom from my experience over the years as an organizer/advocate for adult education.

One of the huge changes in the field with regard to advocating for adult education programs and our students over the last 15 years is that we have managed to demystify the advocacy process. For many years, adult educators had very little idea of how to go about this work. Thankfully we have learned a great deal and simplified the process to the point that the definition of advocacy is pretty clear and concise: to influence public policy you need to get the right information to the right people at the right time with multiple messengers.

Any discussion of advocacy in the adult education field inevitably encounters the question of lobbying. The vast majority of actions taken in an advocacy campaign do not fall under the Internal Revenue definition of lobbying. For those few actions that do meet the IRS definition of lobbying, it is important to note that 501(c)(3) organizations, the backbone of the adult education programs offered by community-based organizations, can utilize up to 10% of their funding for lobbying activities. In almost all cases, an adult education organization engaged in advocacy

will never come close to reaching the 10% limit on any of their activities that would be defined as lobbying (Jeff Carter, personal communication, December 9, 2015).

Lobbying is describe by the IRS as either direct lobbying (communicating a position on specific legislation to a legislator or government employee involved in the formulation of the legislation) or grassroots lobbying, such as urging your community or the general public to contact legislators with a position on a specific piece of legislation. A “call to action” to your members, if you have members, is a good example of grassroots lobbying. Both of these lobbying actions are permissible by 501(c)(3) organizations with up to 10% of their total budgets.

However, not all advocacy involves lobbying. For example, technical assistance or advice to a governmental body or committee in response to an unsolicited written request is advocacy. Additionally, a nonpartisan analysis, study, or piece of research that may advocate a particular view is not considered lobbying provided that (1) the presentation of the relevant facts is sufficient to enable readers to reach an independent conclusion, and (2) the distribution of the results is not limited to or directed toward persons solely interested in one side of a particular issue.

The best example of advocacy on the national

level came in 2005 when then President Bush proposed cutting federal adult education funding by 66% (\$366 million ) for the 2006 fiscal year. His budget proposal, which included this cut, went to Congress in late January. During the next six months the national adult education community flooded Congress with 425,000 letters asking them to reject his proposal. This effort was successful; at the end of the budget cycle, the money stayed in the budget. Senate and House staff indicated that during the six month time period when the budget proposals were under consideration by Congress, adult education along with the concerns of senior citizens received the most mail.

We learned from that advocacy campaign that while data and well written studies/reports about our work are important, the number of contacts with policy makers, particularly from students, is much more important. Another lesson from this campaign was that the field of adult education needs to create advocacy networks that rival those of AARP, NRA, and the National Chamber of Commerce.

Over the years many of our advocacy efforts for adult education have focused on what I would call the “truth and justice” approach to the process. We are convinced that if we can just get the right information to the important people then they will reward us with lots of funding. Unfortunately, there are thousands of other groups that use the same approach. While good, reliable information is essential to an advocacy campaign, good information with 500 or more contacts from constituents is much better.

Other key elements from successful campaigns include:

- **Alignment:** Policy makers will only take note of communication from constituents from their legislative districts. This requires an understanding of where students live,

identifying their representatives and figuring out the best method to connect the two groups. The best way to make the connection to align legislative district maps with the maps of the residences of adult education program students.

- **Threshold number:** Early in the advocacy process, campaigns need to determine a threshold number of supporters for members of the House and Senate. This is the number of contacts that a member needs for their office to determine that an issue is important to the constituency. The easiest way to determine the number for any advocacy campaign is for adult educators to ask their state House members and Senators. As the late Sam Halperin (2001) wrote “Members receiving 25-50 communications over a period of time have been known to exclaim: ‘They’re on my back on this one! I’ve got to move.’” (p. 48). In most states the threshold number for each member of the House is somewhere between 15-30.
- **Targeting:** The concept of targeting is essential. Key members of legislative bodies need to be identified for attention from the field. While contacts with all members of policy making bodies are important some are more important than others (Appropriations/Finance/Education Committee members).
- **Focus on the Governor:** It is much easier to get an increase in adult education funding through a legislature when the Governor proposes the increase in the budget than it is to convince legislators to add the funding during the appropriations process. However, if additional funding is not in the Governor’s

budget proposal then the advocacy campaign should focus on the legislature.

- **Allies:** Identify allies in each local community. In every community there are representatives of hospitals, banks, social service organizations, utilities, churches, higher education institutions, etc. who will be willing to contact policy makers on behalf of a request for additional adult education funding or support for a specific piece of legislation.
- **Champions:** Identify champions in the legislature. Use them to carry the message to other key legislators. Identifying champions is done by asking advocates in the adult education field to name the legislators who have been the most helpful in the past on appropriations/legislation issues.
- **Constant advocacy:** Adult education advocacy should be a year-round activity. Adult educators must have a steady flow of communication with policy makers so that we are not only contacting those folks when we want money. Yearly program reports, invitations to visit programs, and visits to legislators in their offices should all be part of a planned effort to maintain contact with policy makers.

Finally, students must be involved. A continuing major obstacle for advocacy campaigns for adult education is summed up by the chair of a state legislative Ways & Means Committee, “no one believes that adult education has a constituency that we need to pay attention to.” Coupled with the wise words of albeit fictional President Jed Bartlett (West Wing), “Those who show up make the decisions,” we are left with the principle message for future adult education advocacy campaigns: involve massive numbers of students in our campaigns or we will not

be successful in growing or maintaining our field. In the most successful campaigns, approximately 80% of the contacts have come from students and 20% from staff and friends of adult education.

Student letters are highly effective. The most effective student letters contain the following elements: they tell the policy maker why the students enrolled in the adult education program, what they would like to do when they graduate, and an ask (this can be a request for more funding for adult education programs or more generally thanking the member for his/her support). In a recent campaign in a small state, over 2,000 student letters were sent to the Governor’s office before the budget went to the legislature, and 5,000 went to members of the legislature when they were considering the budget. The result was an increase of 7.5% in state funding. However, similar campaigns in the past have resulted in as much as a 100% increases in multiple states.

The increased involvement of students in successful advocacy efforts has recently raised the issue of whether or not political literacy should be added to the goals for adult education programs. Adult educators have been comfortable in expanding the list of goals for their work, most recently adding health and economic literacy to the list of mathematics, reading and writing literacies, however the concept of political literacy, which is more specific than just civic engagement, takes many adult educators into an area with which they have very little background or interest. If we are serious about helping students understand the institutions with which they interact, then political literacy should become a part of every adult education program in the country. By helping students to understand and participate in the political process of their country, state, county, town, or city and thus develop their political/civic literacy, we will be preparing them with tools that they can use

throughout their lives to advocate for themselves, their families and communities. At the same time, we know that student involvement in advocacy is an important element in successful campaigns to maintain or increase funding.

Advocacy campaigns for adult education funding/legislation will continue to arise from time to time in the states and to a much lesser degree on the national level. However, the field of adult education will never become a true national movement until we understand that hundreds of thousands of students must be the driving force in that effort. In order for that to happen, advocacy must become an integral part of adult education at all levels with an intensity that is best expressed by the famous labor organizer Mary Mother Jones: “Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.” ❖

---

**Art Ellison** is longtime advocate for adult education having managed numerous advocacy campaigns over the past forty years on the state and national levels. Prior to his employment in 1980 as the NH State Director of Adult Education he worked for many years as a high school teacher and as a community organizer.

---

## References

Halperin, S. (2001). A guide for the powerless and those who don't know their own power: A primer on the American political process. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.