



Persuasive Storytelling: The Case for High School Equity

CAMPAIGN FOR
CHSE
HIGH SCHOOL EQUITY
Advancing Quality, Expanding Opportunity

MAY 2009

Speaking Persuasively to Advocate for High School Equity

We have all witnessed speakers who present information that goes over our heads and is quickly forgotten. As representatives of the Campaign for High School Equity, the policy issues you discuss with local, State, and Federal lawmakers can affect the future of millions of young people and their families. As such, you must speak clearly and persuasively to ensure that your story and call to action remain with your audience when the meeting ends.

How can you ensure that your advocacy efforts will motivate legislators to take the actions you want?

Face-to-Face is Best

Presenting your experiences and supporting facts in person is the most effective form of communication. While legislators and their staff may be aware that the education crisis affects their constituents, sharing this information in person will put a face on an otherwise abstract issue. You know that families and communities are affected by the inequities in education because you see the effects on a daily basis. Your conviction is persuasive.

Your Experiences are Powerful

One way to ensure that meetings with lawmakers have lasting value is to share personal stories that illustrate your topic. Personal experiences can grab the attention of legislators and their staff, add credibility to your call to action, and create a lasting impression. Personal experiences help you link your audience to what you want them to see, do, or feel.

WHAT MAKES YOUR STORY PERSUASIVE?

Your story will be persuasive if it:

- tells your audience what you want them to do;
- is timely;
- is relevant to your audience and a large number of their constituents;
- is related to a threat or danger to the community and the Nation; and
- presents a human-interest angle.

Plan and Practice

Your meetings with legislators will be most effective and persuasive if you feel comfortable. Here are additional tips to help you prepare.

- **Know your audience.** What is important to them? How do they spend their time? What do they know or think about your issues?
- **Use data and research to illustrate your points.** Convincing data and compelling examples can help change points of view.
- **Don't play the blame game.** Highlighting who has made the biggest mistakes is likely to alienate someone in your audience. Efforts to unite and find a common ground are always more persuasive.
- **Be transparent.** Withholding information leads to distrust and can adversely affect how your messages are received. If legislators or their staffs ask you a question and you don't know the answer, simply let them know you will get back to them with a response—and then make sure you do so in a timely manner.

Memorable Statements

Short and animated statements are more memorable than lengthy, lackluster explanations. Like the rest of us, policymakers are busy and appreciate phrases that get to the heart of the matter—the call to action.

To help you develop efficient statements, follow these tips developed by Michael Sheehan Associates, Inc.

- **Use personal statements and anecdotes.** They reaffirm your authority and are difficult to challenge.
- **Use analogies.** The more straightforward the better, especially on complex issues.
- **Avoid exaggerations or puffery.** Give specific examples.
- **Use one-liners.** Practice them and be prepared.
- **Use proportionate numbers or approximate numbers** (“about one quarter,” or “nearly a thousand”). If a legislator needs the exact number, he or she will ask.

Remember Your SOCO (Single Overriding Communications Objective)!

Studies have shown that **an audience retains one or two key messages** from a speech or presentation. Taking this into consideration and recognizing the inherent time limitations on all presentations, you must maximize the time you have to present your information.

To use your time efficiently and to ensure that your audience understands your key points, you need to first **identify up to three messages** that you wish to communicate through your presentation. One way to approach this task is to develop a SOCO—**single overriding communications objective**—for your presentation. The SOCO:

- reflects the core messages of your organization—the critical information about your project that you want to leave with your audience after a presentation or interview.
- will help you organize your thoughts; after that, if necessary, you can develop a more targeted set of messages that tie your SOCO to an individual speech or presentation.
- is the reason to do a policy briefing, legislative hearing, or any other presentation. If you focus on your core communications objective, there will be no doubt in the audience's mind about what you stand for and how you want them to think and behave.
- protects you from audience members or interviewers who try to lead you away from your message. When faced with questions intended to distract you from your key messages, use transitions (see next page) to get back to your main point.
- can help you achieve the “KISS” principle—Keep It Short and Simple. People are flooded with information, and what is not immediately understood is often discarded. Only a small percentage of what is heard is retained, so make sure what you say is brief and crystal clear.

Transitions

Use these phrases to get back to your SOCO:

- The real issue is...
- But just as important is...
- Let me explain...
- But equally important...
- It's important to tell your viewers (readers, listeners)...
- You know, I think it's equally important to know...
- I'm also frequently asked...
- Let me add...
- Another question I'm asked is...
- We might be overlooking...
- A common concern is...
- You can go a step further...
- For instance...
- I'm proud to be able to tell you...
- For example...
- Let me give you the facts...
- You should also know that...

Prepare Your SOCO

1. Who are you? (Your name, occupation, title/position, geographic area in which you work and reside.)

2. What have you witnessed in your work and in your community that illustrates aspects of the education crisis? (For example: you are an elected school board official in a predominantly low-income and minority community who knows numerous students who have left high school unprepared for college or work.)

3. What is currently going on in the world of education policy that is causing you to make this presentation today? (For example, many students of color are being placed in classes below their ability.)

4. What do you want legislators to do once they have heard your story? (For example, you want states to adopt graduation reporting requirements that account for students who need additional time to complete their high school degree.)
