



NNSTOY

TEACHERS LEADING

POLICY • PRACTICE • ADVOCACY

ENGAGED: Educators and the Policy Process

— NATIONAL NETWORK OF STATE TEACHERS OF THE YEAR —





We at the National Network of State Teachers of the Year are delighted to share with you our second white paper in our series of policy papers. The papers in this series have several characteristics in common:

- Focusing on a critical policy issue for educators, typically around teacher leadership;
- Collecting the voices of a number of our nation's best teachers, our State and National Teachers of the Year and Finalists;
- Building upon research already conducted in the area of focus;
- Revitalizing the discussion of the issue through the lens of outstanding educators.

In the first white paper, *Re-Imagining Teaching: Five Structures to Transform the Profession*, we discussed five components to transform the teaching profession: professional career continuums, distributed leadership models, actionable feedback, collaborative practice, and guiding principles for the profession.

In this second white paper, we focus on the issue of engaging educators in the policy process. Through the individual voices of ten outstanding educators, we provide real-life examples of ways in which these practitioners have successfully engaged in the policy process. In some examples, that engagement is at the local level; in others, it is at the state or national level; in others, it is through different policy mechanisms.

Each of these examples provides key take-aways for other educators and for policy makers, influencers, and shapers. Here are three primary points that we'd like everyone to digest:

1. Intended policy outcomes are more likely to be achieved and unintended consequences avoided when expert teachers are part of policy development and implementation planning.
2. Policy will more effectively address the diverse set of PK-12 student needs when expert teachers are part of the policy process.
3. Explicitly designed initiatives and structures can generate effective partnerships between policy makers and expert teachers.

At NNSTOY, we believe that educators should always be at the table when education policy is being crafted, debated, or modified. As professionals, we know what is likely to directly impact students and the work in the classroom, both positively and negatively.

We are excited to share this paper with you and look forward to working with you in bringing the voice of educators to the policy process.

With warm regards,



Katherine Bassett

Chief Executive Officer, NNSTOY

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- Maddie Fennell
- Marguerite Izzo
- Leah Lechleiter-Luke
- Rebecca Mieliwocki
- Justin Minkel
- Michelle Pearson
- Christopher Poulos
- Maryann Woods-Murphy

It is the personal journeys of State Teachers of the Year who have shaped, influenced and prepared policy that form the bulk of this paper. These incredible teacher leaders have much to impart to educators and policymakers about collaborating to effect policy changes that result in a strengthened teaching profession and increased student learning.

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What Policy Makers Say

Kelly Henson, Executive Director of the Georgia Professional Standards Commission:

Educational leadership has become too large and complex for any one person – or even a very small group of people – to manage successfully. Teachers have excellent leadership capabilities, and we have only scratched the surface of the potential of teacher leadership.

Policy decisions that involve teaching and learning should be grounded in current knowledge and practical experience. For this to happen, teachers must play a significant role.

U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy, VT:

“The classroom – and classroom teachers – are where theory meets practice. As we aim to close the achievement gap and enable our children to be fully prepared to take on the opportunities and challenges ahead of them, teachers must be part of the conversation. Teachers are often the first and sometimes the only support for students with a complex variety of needs that go well beyond what is found in their textbooks. The best thing that we can do is to engage those who are inspiring our students in the policymaking process.”

Stefan Pryor, Former Connecticut Commissioner of Education:

“As partners in the implementation of many educational initiatives, teachers offer a unique and important perspective on policy. Through their lens, we gain insight into the real impact policy decisions have – or will have – in the classroom.”

Cheryl Youakim, Minnesota State Representative:

“It is important to listen to our teachers, they are the community experts. To be effective with any policy, you need to talk to the people who have to apply it in a current real life setting.”

Senator Angus King, ME:

“As a former governor, I understand what it means to grapple with federal mandates, and this experience has remained at the front of my mind during my work in the U.S. Senate. While Congress negotiates a replacement for No Child Left Behind, it is particularly important for our leaders to hear from the teachers who implement federal policies on a day-to-day basis to ensure the best outcomes for our students.”

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Setting the Stage

Those who serve in public office are tasked with monumental jobs for little financial compensation and less recognition. They do their best to gain expertise in areas under their jurisdiction and often seek to consult with experts in these fields.

The premise of this paper is that education policy results are better for students when policies are informed and shaped by highly effective educators who know firsthand what it takes to deliver excellent teaching and learning. Policymakers and educators should share a sense of urgency to work together to provide every child in our country with an excellent education. As put by one State Teacher of the Year, “[T]he glaring reality is that when policy is made without teachers, the policies fail kids.”

While educators hunger for a voice in policy shaping, that voice is not given to us – it must be earned.

At a recent gathering of the 2014 State Teachers of the Year (STOYs), Sarah Brown Wessling, Iowa and National Teacher of the Year 2010, reminded us that while educators hunger for a voice in policy shaping, that voice is not given to us – it must be earned. Teachers in the National Network of State Teachers of the Year are given many opportunities to access policy makers that other teachers are not, and we have learned that Sarah is correct. Access does not guarantee voice. Influence must be earned. But when earned and used judiciously, that influence can drive better decisions for students.

How do educators earn and use influential voice? How do we establish credibility with policymakers? And then how do we use that credibility to ensure that policy decisions are made in the interests of great teaching and learning? In this paper, ten STOYs provide examples of how their voices have been earned and how their participation has influenced policy shifts. These ten vignettes provide glimpses of what engaging in and influencing policy may look like. We offer them to inform and inspire more teachers to join their peers who have ventured into the policy arena.

If teachers were deeply involved in policy making, the quality and impact of the policies would improve. The “active involvement of individuals at all levels and within all domains of an organization is necessary if change is to take hold,” one influential research paper stated.¹ Another researcher asserted that “teachers need to assume leadership positions if efforts to improve education are to succeed.”²

We believe that when policymakers regularly and actively engage with highly effective educators around policy and programs, initiatives will be more likely to work in the best interest of students and less likely to suffer pushback. Administrators and officials will not have to work to achieve “buy in” because teachers and principals will already be with them, on the team shaping the vision and implementation.

To that end, we propose widening the proverbial tent. Too often teachers have had little say over the policies governing our work. Teachers are asked to endorse policies that are already written, to implement programs already formed. When we are tapped for expertise, it is largely to “message” something that has been decided by others, rather than to be on the team informing and making decisions. This is not the best approach to ensure that policies attract great teachers and enable great teaching.

In short, we agree with a report published by the Center for American Policy, which indicates that the firsthand experience of teachers “gives them a unique and critical vantage point from which to assess the efficacy of educational policy decisions. Omitting them from this arena seems [like] an approach destined to create more problems than it solves.”³

Overcoming Obstacles to Teacher Engagement in Policy

Today there are numerous obstacles that prevent teachers from influencing policy.

One is a lack of time and access. Teachers with full-time classroom duties have little time to travel to a school district office, let alone to the state capitol to participate in working groups writing legislation or to Washington, D.C. to meet with the Secretary of Education. Another obstacle is that traditionally, writing policy and advocating has not been seen as part of the teacher's job.

But perhaps the biggest reason classroom teachers have limited influence over policy is that teaching does not facilitate policy and advocacy engagement by design. In an October 2013 report, the National Network of State Teachers of the Year identified five [structures](#) that would help professionalize teaching and promote a profession of teacher leaders who could engage in policy and advocacy:

- A professional career continuum.
- Distributed leadership models.
- Collaborative practice.
- Actionable feedback.
- Guiding professional principles developed by educators.⁴

But perhaps the biggest reason classroom teachers have limited influence over policy is that teaching does not facilitate policy and advocacy engagement by design.

A professional career continuum that permits for multiple leadership roles and responsibilities across the various stages of teachers' development would allow them, if they chose, to help shape local, state and federal policies by offering new opportunities and models for teachers. The Teacher Leader Exploratory Consortium, the group that created the *Teacher Leader Model Standards*, described a variety of ways in which teachers provide leadership inside their schools, as well as outlining roles for teacher leaders as researchers, contributors to policymaking and advocates for the profession.

Absent the professional structures to facilitate teacher engagement in policy and advocacy, teachers have turned to alternative approaches to be heard by decision-makers. Over the past five years, a number of "teacher voice" organizations have come into being. These organizations, such as NNSTOY, Hope Street Group, Teach Plus, Educators for Excellence, the Viva Project, and America Achieves provide teachers opportunities to receive training in working with policy makers, collaborate with their peers on policy-related research, and to discuss their ideas with local, state and federal policymakers.

Educators selected as National and State Teachers of the Year and Finalists also have many opportunities during our year of recognition, followed by our years of service, to meet with policymakers at the local, state and national levels and to influence policy. The [National Network of State Teachers of the Year \(NNSTOY\)](#), gives us continuing opportunities to exercise our influence. Many STOYS and Finalists take advantage of these opportunities long after their official work as STOYS and Finalists is finished.

The U.S. Department of Education (USED) also made amplifying the voices of classroom teachers a priority. USED's Teacher Ambassador Program allows a select group of teachers to serve as fellows for a year and provide advice to USED on policy matters. USED also is working with the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards as well as the Council of Chief State School Officers, other organizations including NNSTOY, superintendents and principals on an effort called "Teach to Lead: Advancing Teacher Leadership" to increase leadership opportunities for teachers. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan vowed that USED would "build teacher leadership into everything we do."⁵

"Teacher leadership means having a voice in the policies and decisions that affect your students, your daily work and the

“Teacher leadership means having a voice in the policies and decisions that affect your students, your daily work and the shape of your profession,” Duncan said.

shape of your profession,” Duncan said, in announcing the initiative. “It means guiding the growth of your colleagues. It means that teaching can’t be a one-size-fits-all job — that there must be different paths based on different interests, and you don’t have to end up with the same job description that you started with. It means sharing in decisions that traditionally were only by administrators — and the best administrators know they’ll make better decisions when they listen to teachers.”⁶ As the Teach to Lead initiative has unfolded, three regional summits, in which NNSTOY is engaged, help educators to develop skills in interacting with policy as part of their teacher leadership.

But engaging educators in policy shaping is not happening as much as it should. The Gallup organization [reported in the spring of 2014](#) that, of 12 professions, teachers are least likely to agree with the statement that “my opinion seems to matter at work.”⁷

Consider these data:

- 70 percent of teachers believe that they are left out of the loop in the district decision-making process.
- 80 percent feel that they are rarely consulted about what happens in their schools.
- 70 percent believe that district leaders only talk to them to win their support.
- Only 23 percent believe that district leaders speak to them to gain a stronger sense of teachers’ concerns.
- Half of the teachers surveyed felt that they were not even heard by their union and that decisions were made by a small group of highly engaged, typically veteran union members.⁸

Secretary Duncan cited a recent poll which found that 69 percent of teachers think their voices are heard in their school, but only a third say they are heard in their district, 5 percent in their state, and 2 percent at the national level. “That’s unacceptable,” Duncan said. “It’s time to change that.”⁹

How do we change this dynamic? One of NNSTOY’s areas of focus is to push for changes in policy, attitudes, and behavior that will amplify teachers’ voices and make it routine that local, state and national policymakers seek the advice and rely on the expertise of highly effective teachers; this will ensure that decisions are made with the insights of those who truly understand how to achieve student success at the table.

This white paper is the second in a three-paper series. It is based on a dozen interviews with teacher leaders in our organization who have not only been named State Teachers of the Year or Finalists, but have the training and experience that position them to be advocates for teacher leadership and broader collaboration. Some of these teachers have worked as Teaching Ambassador Fellows for the U.S. Department of Education, served in hybrid teacher leadership roles, or worked with district and state officials to implement teacher-led initiatives in their schools. Like many teachers, they share a desire to be involved in implementing change for the betterment of students.

Below, teacher leaders share their real-life experiences working with policymakers in various contexts, as well as the written contributions of a number of additional outstanding teachers. This white paper is also informed by research we conducted on [teacher career continuums](#). Though there are many obstacles to overcome in including highly effective teachers in policymaking, there has been some progress made, as shown in the vignettes on the next page.

A Deep-Dive Look Into Educator Engagement in Policy

We often hear about bringing teachers to the table in policy discussion, but what does policy involvement and advocacy look like?

The paper provides examples of how some teachers have effectively engaged in the policy process and is intended to encourage other educators to engage in similar activities and policymakers to recognize their value. It is organized by the types of policy engagement experienced by STOYs and Finalists. These are:

- Informing and Shaping Federal Policy
- Engaging Educator Colleagues in the Policy Process
- Working With Policymakers to Craft Legislation
- Effectively Engaging With State Policymakers
- Hybrid Roles: Bridging Policy Development and the Classroom
- Advancing Teacher Leadership Through Policy at the National and International Levels
- Shaping Policy Through Relationships with Unions and Organizations
- Educators Serving as Policymakers
- Supporting Engagement in Policy Through Teacher Leadership

In each interview, STOYs shared an important observation: Including teachers in the development of policy is as important, if not more important, for gaining buy-in as asking teachers to weigh in on the value or effectiveness of a policy after it has been developed.

The interviews and vignettes show that we have much to learn about engaging with policymakers. Too many times, educators go about outreach to policymakers in ways that are counterproductive, frustrating both parties. These insights provide local, state and national leaders, as well as teachers themselves, with models of what it can look like when teachers work to influence policy as well as how those opportunities could be expanded and improved.

As STOYs and Finalists, we have more opportunities than many other educators to get involved in the legislative process and interact with policymakers. Many of those interviewed for this paper talked about how they were involved in influencing policy before they were selected as STOYs or Finalists and how such opportunities increased after becoming STOYs or Finalists. As STOYs and Finalists, we serve as translators, collaborators, conveners, ambassadors and advocates. As one STOY put it, "As a teacher leader, I have not only worked as a translator between policy and practice, but have advocated tirelessly for a structure that will bring teachers and policymakers together at the state house and in public schools."

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Informing and Shaping Federal Policy

A number of STOYs and Finalists have had the opportunity to serve as Teaching Ambassador Fellows (TAFs) with USED, either by staying in their classrooms and serving as Regional TAFs or by leaving their classrooms for one year to move to Washington, D.C., and provide daily input into the policies made by USED. These individuals have had a hand in shaping the RESPECT proposal, the [Teach to Lead](#) initiative, and other federal initiatives impacting classroom practice and teacher leadership. This opportunity to inform policy has been deeply meaningful and carried forward when fellows return to the classroom. Below is a perspective on these experiences.

Educator's Perspective: Maryann Woods-Murphy
2010 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year
Horace Mann Finalist 2012
U.S. Department of Education Teaching Fellow 2011
America Achieves Fellow 2013-2015

When I became a Teaching Ambassador Fellow in the summer of 2011, I was ready to speak “teacher” to the powerful people I would meet in Washington. Immediately, the TAFs began meeting with teachers around the country to seek their responses to a set of big ideas for radically transforming teaching into a fully recognized profession.

Collectively, the fellows led more than 100 meetings with teachers across the country. Teachers welcomed us into their faculty rooms, cafeterias, community centers and classrooms to think together about the future of our profession. They spoke to us with passion and offered courageous advice.

Those conversations planted the seeds for what would be the Obama Administration's RESPECT initiative. RESPECT stands for Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence and Collaborative Teaching. The TAFs led a second round of discussions with more teachers, the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers and other national and international organizations.

The result was a vision statement based on the best thinking of thousands of teachers. In May 2012, eight national organizations endorsed the statement. Its elements include:

- 1. a culture of shared responsibility and leadership*
- 2. top talent, prepared for success*
- 3. continuous growth and improvement*
- 4. effective teachers and principals*
- 5. a professional career continuum with competitive compensation*
- 6. conditions for successful teaching and learning*

In its proposed budget for FY 2015, the Obama Administration included \$5 billion for projects related to the RESPECT vision. If approved, that money would fund as many as 1,000 projects in states, districts and schools to make the vision statement of transforming the teaching profession a reality. The words, work and insights of teachers will be as critical to the success of those projects as they were to the creation of RESPECT in the first place. It will be teachers on the ground who will sustain our profession and lead us forward in changing and challenging times.

My work on the RESPECT project showed me, up close and personal, that teachers are capable of transforming policy as well as their profession. If more teachers have experiences such as these they will come to understand that writing policy is part of the work of being a teacher. For those opportunities to be made available to more than a select few, school districts need to begin granting release time for teachers to engage in this work, and school administrators need to create cultures that value it. Working on policy issues must be a respected — and expected — part of a teacher's career. Teachers who are involved in policy-related work also need access to networks of colleagues beyond their own school district to feel supported and remain engaged.

For those opportunities to be made available to more than a select few, school districts need to begin granting release time for teachers to engage in this work, and school administrators need to create cultures that value it.

Key lessons learned:

- In order to be truly effective in working to shape policy, educators need some release time from the classroom in order to interact directly with policymakers;
- School administrators need help in understanding the value that these interactions can bring to their schools;
- We need cultural shifts. School culture needs to embrace the idea that working on policy is an important part of an educator's work;
- Educators who engage in policy must also feel supported by their colleagues in order to stay engaged in the policy work.

Engaging Educator Colleagues in the Policy Process

The STOYs interviewed recognize that one of the important aspects of leadership is getting others to share their views with policymakers.

However, some interviewees reported interacting with colleagues whose previous experience in attempting to influence policymaking had not been positive, leaving them discouraged and unlikely to get involved again. Some STOYs recounted experiences in which they were asked to respond to policies but were not trusted to actually devise policy despite their knowledge of what makes a difference for students in classrooms and schools. Others talked about the disappointments that come with attempting to influence policy. Ultimately, many teacher-generated solutions to public policy problems do not survive the political process.

Such encounters with policymakers represent missed opportunities. "Teacher leaders are capable of far more than feedback," one STOY said. "We are capable of even more than closing the 'implementation gap' between a policy's intended outcome and its actual impact on students in the classroom. We are capable of helping to design the kinds of systems our students need in order to fulfill their full potential as thinkers, scientists, writers, mathematicians and human beings."

Trust is a theme that came up frequently in these interviews. STOYs said colleagues did not think policymakers were interested in hearing their ideas. Another said her colleagues were skeptical of her motivations in leading a group with the purpose of influencing policy and reluctant to discuss their experiences. Several STOYs said peers accused them of working "for the other side," reflecting an internalization of the historic divide between those who make policy and those who carry it out. Fortunately, all STOYs interviewed who experienced this skepticism overcame it by developing trusting relationships with colleagues.

In some cases, STOYs said getting colleagues involved was relatively easy. "I have met many great teachers who are masters of their craft and consistently working towards finding ways to implement instruction and better serve the needs of their students," one interviewee said. But keeping colleagues engaged, given the slow pace and complexity of the legislative process, was difficult.

Another concern is the perception that working to influence policy may require leaving classroom teaching entirely. That is a legitimate concern. There are few effective models that allow for teachers to do both. Due to monetary and scheduling constraints, some administrators discourage teachers from getting involved outside the classroom or taking on schoolwide duties. If they do, then it is an activity that often must be done ad hoc and on their own time. We in education need to look more closely at how this works in other fields. Some professions hold Days on the Hill, in which professionals spend a day in Washington, D.C., meeting with legislators. Is this something that we could do at the state and national levels in teaching?

Trust is a common theme among these interviews.

Rebecca Mieliwski, the 2013 National Teacher of the Year, said, "The amount of time and effort it takes to be up to speed, visible and impactful on a local, state or national policy level conflicts with the sheer amount of time it takes to be an effective teacher."

Rebecca continued, “Those who become teacher leaders have found a way to bend a schedule to their will so that they can teach some and lead some. That requires reimagining the profession, our work days, and in some cases, our pay. Visionary principals respect teacher leaders and are willing to do what it takes to see them do this important work. Mostly, the traditional infrastructure for schools and teachers limits this. We have to get creative in how we staff schools and in how we allocate time and resources so that teachers can lead on their campuses and in their communities, large and small. Hybrid roles/credentials can help, moving teacher prep programs onto school campuses is another innovation that could change the framework for us, and the teachers unions should be miles out front of creating and finding use for their teacher leaders.”

Below, two STOYs describe their experiences convening with teachers and policymakers to discuss education policy.

Educator’s Perspective: Jeanne DelColle
2012 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year
Hope Street Fellow 2013
Instructional Development and Strategic Partnerships Specialist

What happens when you fill a room with passionate educators to come up with creative solutions to longstanding issues in education? Magic. As New Jersey’s 2012 State Teacher of the Year, I experienced this amazing phenomenon as I sat with other STOYs from all over the country in various meetings to discuss issues such as teacher evaluation and the implementation of the Common Core.

I wanted to re-create that atmosphere in New Jersey and build a bridge that would bring practitioners and policymakers together to determine the best course of action for students and the profession. The New Jersey Commissioner of Education gave me that opportunity when he asked me to reach out to educators across the state. My goal was to broaden their perspective beyond their classrooms by having them engage in discussions with state Department of Education staff.

The New Jersey Teacher Advisory Panel Pilot was born. The 90 participants were chosen to be as representative of the state’s teachers as possible. They came from every county in the state and taught in elementary, middle and high schools. They specialized in 15 different content areas and ranged in experience from four to 34 years. I convened the teachers in three regional meetings monthly for discussions with key Department of Education staff. The purpose of the meetings was not to air complaints or place blame. Rather, it was to give teachers opportunities to share their ideas, inform policy decisions and work with NJDOE staff on solutions to problems.

The teachers wanted to talk about where policy meets implementation and what it looks like in the classroom. We talked about evaluation, Common Core, teacher preparation, professional development, special education and the USED’s RESPECT project. The NJDOE had ideas and research but little understanding of how to implement these effectively. They wanted help with ways to improve teacher preparation, professional development and special education, as well as other areas of policy. As word got around about this great group of teachers, more staff from the NJDOE wanted to work with us.

I think this effort worked well because I set clear ground rules, the teachers on the panel were representative of the state’s teachers as a whole, and we gathered data on ideas and recommendations discussed.

The ground rules were:

- *Build consensus*
- *Know both sides of the story and which level (local, district, state) is responsible*
- *Don’t complain, discuss*
- *Think about solution that will work beyond YOUR classroom*

It was clear from their applications that these teachers were already serving as leaders. But many had not yet found their voice. The transformation of the teachers over several months of meetings and a final meeting with the U.S. Department of Education was impressive. They gained confidence and gathered information they then shared with colleagues in their districts. The NJDOE staff asked members of the advisory panel to serve on other committees and working groups. The biggest testament to the panel's impact was that it continued after my stint with the state ended and I joined the School of Education at Richard Stockton College. It was no longer a pilot. The panel had shown its value and became an ongoing state effort.

One reflection on this experience is that teachers' perspectives of education issues are broadened by working on policy issues with teachers from other schools and districts. If the only knowledge you have of schools is from the school where you work, you'll have little more than anecdotes on which to base your policy recommendations.

Another is that many teachers know little about the education system or that it has changed very little in the last 100 years. Knowledge is power, so I think the completion of a course on the history of American education should be required to be certified as a teacher. It's also important for teachers to learn how departments of education operate.

Third, students, schools and districts would benefit from having some of their teachers spend part of their workday involved in policy work. Schools and districts benefit from the teacher's knowledge and access, and students benefit from having a practitioner advocating for realistic education policies and implementation. NJTAPP was a success because I was on loan to the NJDOE, and that gave me both time and access. Teachers trusted me because I was a teacher who spoke their language and had their best interests in mind.

It should be an expectation that teachers, administrators, policymakers and higher education will work together with clear ground rules and open communication to develop and implement a cohesive vision of education and teaching careers from preparation through retirement.

Educator's Perspective: Leah Lechleiter-Luke
2010 Wisconsin State Teacher of the Year
United States Education Department Classroom Teaching Ambassador 2011

My selection as Wisconsin's 2010 State Teacher of the Year opened my eyes to the lack of teacher input into education policy. It seemed as if the people with the most practical knowledge about education and teaching were being excluded from the decision-making process.

So, when the 2010 class of STOYs was invited to participate in a USED policy webinar, I jumped at the opportunity. More than the content of the webinar, what struck me most about it was the fact that a teacher was leading the discussion. STOYs talk a lot about bringing "teachers to the table" in policy discussions, and here was an example of a teacher not just at the table but leading the discussion.

That was my introduction to the USED's Teaching Ambassador Fellowship. Inspired, I applied for and was selected to be a 2011-2012 Classroom Teaching Ambassador Fellow. In this role, I was able to remain in my classroom while contributing to federal policy discussions. I participated in the development of the RESPECT document. In small group settings, I provided feedback to state education leaders from Massachusetts, Kentucky, at a Race to the Top convening in Washington, DC, and at the Labor Management 2 Conference in Cincinnati in September, 2012. I spent a year learning about federal policy, sharing information with teachers and stakeholders across my region, collecting their input and feeding that input back to policymakers in Washington, D.C. I was grateful for the opportunity: Teachers were being heard.

When my year with USED ended, I was invited to recap my experiences with the Wisconsin superintendent of schools and his cabinet. The content of the presentation must have made an impression because soon I was asked to form and facilitate a panel of teachers to advise the superintendent.

What resulted was the Wisconsin Teachers of the Year Council, which meets three times a year and comprises 20 current and former Wisconsin special services, elementary, middle, and high school teachers who all had been recognized for their leadership and instructional excellence. These teacher leaders receive information from state policymakers on topics such as the Educator Effectiveness evaluation system, Common Core implementation, new student data system and new statewide assessments. In turn they provided direct feedback on these initiatives to the state superintendent and his staff. While the council represents a big step forward within the Wisconsin Department of Education, there is still a need for teachers to develop their own independent voices.

That is why I have been working with a few members of the council to create a Wisconsin Teachers of the Year Network, modeled after the National Network of State Teachers of the Year. We have invited all former STOYs, including finalists, to join the nascent organization. So far, we have issued two op-eds, testified in support of Common Core and established a presence on social media. We are not waiting to be invited to the table; we are making a spot for ourselves.

I hear about teacher “buy-in” all the time. That implies that the work is already done and the policy exists. Teachers should be involved in the creation of policy from the start. But this requires that principals, district administrators and even school boards recognize teachers as educational leaders who bring expertise to this work. This is not how it works in most places today. I remember being invited to speak to a group of 30 superintendents from my region. When I arrived they were discussing ways to improve student achievement in their districts, and it struck me that not a single current classroom teacher was in the room. I challenged them to involve a teacher at the beginning of their next meeting. I haven’t been invited back.

I also think states have to find a way to communicate directly to teachers. I’ve had the opportunity to work with the Wisconsin Department of Education, so I hear firsthand about new policies. Yet, when information about these same policies comes to me through my district, they often have changed considerably. Education departments need to, first, work with teachers to develop policies and then deploy an army of teachers to share information about the policies with their colleagues.

Finally, states should do more to engage and empower their most accomplished teachers, including Teachers of the Year. This is a pool of largely untapped talent. My state superintendent saw something that day in my presentation to his cabinet. He then gave me the opportunity to create the panel of teachers. I seized on that opportunity and built on it, and since then I’ve been able to accomplish more than I ever thought possible.

Key lessons learned:

- Building trust with stakeholders is critical.
- One tactic for amplifying the voices of other teachers is to conduct formal and informal conversations to seek their perspectives, which they then convey to policymakers. Engaging with teachers from different districts whose views on issues vary adds to teachers’ credibility with policymakers.
- One STOY interviewee noted that social media makes it possible to interact with peers nationally as well as locally. “The teachers’ lounge is no longer confined by the walls of our schools,” this STOY said.
- Another tactic is to encourage peers themselves to get involved in pushing for policies that benefit students and support educators in their practice. A third important contribution in this regard is helping peers learn how to be effective in their advocacy.
- Work with a group of educators to build consensus on a key policy issue.
- Work to develop a strong relationship with your State Education Agency (SEA); offer to serve as a conduit, taking information from the SEA out to teachers and bringing information from teachers back to the SEA, as well as organizing focus groups for SEA staff and teachers to come together.

Working With Policymakers to Craft Legislation

Most of the STOYs interviewed reported constructive interactions with legislators.

One STOY talked about the close relationship she maintains with a key state legislator many years after her year of recognition as STOY. She thinks that a constructive relationship developed because she approached the legislator with teacher-generated solutions instead of criticisms.

Most of the STOYs interviewed reported constructive interactions with legislators.

This was a consistent theme in the interviewees' comments. Merely recounting the shortcomings of policies is not productive.

During our year of recognition, every STOY also meets with federal legislators. We learn the importance of honing a message, doing homework to understand the agenda and interests of the legislators we meet, and being prepared to respond to questions about practice as well as policy.

Five members of the class of 2007 went so far as to actually draft a piece of federal legislation called the Teachers at the Table Act. Two of them, Justin Minkel and Marguerite Izzo, describe this effort here.

Educators Perspective: Marguerite Izzo

New York State Teacher of the Year 2007

Member, Teacher Leader Standards Consortium

Board Member, National Network of State Teachers of the Year

United States Teacher Representative to the International Summit on the Teaching Profession 2011, 2012

2014 Inductee, National Teacher Hall of Fame

Educator's Perspective: Justin Minkel

Arkansas State Teacher of the Year 2007

Board Member, National Network of State Teachers of the Year

Milken Educator 2006

Teach for America 2000

Ed Week Blogger for Center for Teaching Quality

The most system-shaking ideas are often the simplest. In 2008, Teachers of the Year from every state in the nation proposed a partnership between America's teachers and America's lawmakers. The principle behind the proposal was simple: Teachers should have a seat at the table when the laws that shape our classrooms are written.

We had no money, no lobbying experience and no blocs of votes we could promise our legislators. All we had was the strength of an idea: If legislators and teachers work in partnership to craft education policies, those policies will work better for students and families.

Every Teacher of the Year had seen laws — passed by well-meaning, intelligent people who care deeply about children — that went on to fail because of the "implementation gap" between intention and reality. Laws that sounded good on paper sometimes proved disastrous once they rolled out with real students in real classrooms.

Policies that achieved their intentions were usually those shaped by genuine input from classroom teachers — not just a stamp of approval or input on minor changes to completed policies, but influence on the front end when the policies were being written.

Lawmakers listened. Soon we had big name senators backing the Teachers at the Table Act, including Sens. Snowe and Collins (R-Maine), Lincoln (D-Ark.) and Lieberman (I-Conn.). We had sponsors in the House from both sides of the aisle, Carolyn McCarthy, Democrat from New York, and Lee Terry, Republican from Nebraska.

Having a collective voice of Teachers of the Year from multiple states had two tremendous advantages. Senators, representative and their legislative aides always made time to meet with a Teacher of the Year from their own state. Five Teachers of the Year from various states would show up for that meeting and present the proposal that all 51 Teachers of the Year had endorsed. Legislators saw immediately that this proposed partnership wasn't the brainchild of a single teacher but of an entire network of Teachers of the Year.

We represented every state and region, in urban, rural and suburban school districts, with students who ranged from kindergartners to high school seniors. Yet we had a shared conviction that this partnership had the power to transform the way in which laws governing America's schools are written.

The language of the Senate and House resolution for the Teachers at the Table Act was simple, thoughtful and eloquent.

"Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, The Secretary shall establish an advisory committee, to be known as the Volunteer Teacher Advisory Committee. The duty of the Committee shall be to monitor the effects of (the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) in classrooms, and the focus of the Committee shall solely be on children and families."

The committee was to include 20 Teachers of the Year appointed by the Secretary of Education, the Senate Majority and Minority Leaders, the Speaker of the House and the House Minority leader.

The Teachers at the Table Act is a simple concept, yet it would mark the first formal partnership between U.S. lawmakers and U.S. teachers in history.

Key lessons learned:

- Approaching legislators with solutions and a rationale to support those solutions is far more likely to yield a positive response from policymakers, who then are more likely to solicit teachers' feedback, insight and counsel.
- Be prepared; know the legislators positions in advance and figure out what is most important to him or her; then capitalize on it in making your pitch.
- Practice before you meet; how will you make best use of the ten minutes you are likely to get in front of an influential policymaker?
- Simply and sincerely ask legislators how we can be of service; that can be an effective door-opener with policymakers.
- Follow up – building an ongoing relationship, not a one-time meeting is the goal.
- Continue to proactively reach out to the legislator and to staffers to offer insights on key issues so that they become accustomed to hearing from you and begin to view you as a resource.
- Do not spend this precious time complaining.

Effectively Engaging With State Policymakers

Many STOYs and Finalists use the training in policy and advocacy that we receive during our year of recognition in the year of service that follows by working with legislators at the state level. This work takes many forms. Some STOYs and Finalists monitor legislative activity by attending legislative sessions, speaking out on bills, providing input into the shaping of bills and mobilizing colleagues to take a position on legislation or potential legislation.

As an example, there are several STOYs and Finalists involved in the creation and sustainment of an advocacy organization called Advance Illinois. In November 2009, with generous support from the Joyce Foundation, Advance Illinois formed its Educator Advisory Council. This group of award-winning Illinois education professionals represents all grade levels and spans content specialties. Their feedback and support helps to ensure that human capital and policy recommendations can be effectively implemented at the classroom, school and district levels. The council's input both helps win support of policymakers and ensures that policy recommendations are based on best practices.

The Educator Advisory Council was formed to provide:

- Ongoing direction for education policy in Illinois.
- A key resource and source of information for legislators, state agency leadership and community activists.
- A continuous link to policymakers as they make decisions about legislative and regulatory changes in Illinois education.

The council's primary objectives continue to be to (1) inform policy priorities – grounding reform in actual experience; (2) advocate for the value and impact of reform through representation at high-level policy planning discussions, legislative information meetings and hearings, regional town halls and community conversations, and (3) ensure an effective and strong voice for teachers .

This is where we, as teacher leaders, need to be the initiators and reach out to our state representatives.

Despite such examples, in some ways it is almost easier for STOYs and Finalists to engage with policymakers at the federal level. During our Year of Recognition, we meet with our federal policymakers during visits to Washington, D.C. Meeting with our state legislators can be more difficult. Often, we have no formal introduction to state legislators, as we do to federal counterparts. This is where we, as teacher leaders, need to be the initiators and reach out to our state representatives.

In many states, legislatures are only in session for part of the year or do not meet every year. This also makes outreach to legislators more difficult.

While finding avenues for teacher leaders to influence policy at the state level can be complicated, a STOY recounts one such experience below.

Educator's Perspective: Michelle Pearson
2011 Colorado State Teacher of the Year
Daughters of the American Revolution Colorado Award Recipient for Teaching of American History 2014

In the space of only a few years, Colorado lawmakers approved a new teacher evaluation system, adopted new content standards and directed the Colorado Department of Education to oversee creation of new assessments. All of those changes have been placed into effect over the last two years. Teacher leaders were only involved in minor ways in crafting the legislation which would mandate these rapid-fire changes. To the extent they were involved, it was due to the efforts of individual and small groups of teacher leaders who took the initiative to share their views with legislators and policymakers. That situation changed with the creation of the Council for Professional Policy and Practice at the Colorado Education Association, one of two statewide unions. This council now helps bring the Teacher Leader voice to critical policy and decision makers in the state while policy is being crafted, not after it has been passed.

Composed of outstanding educators, the council is filled with advocates for our profession. Now in its second year, the council works diligently to add its voice to legislative initiatives, advocate for exceptional professional teaching practices, and communicate a common understanding of the importance of being an educator. Through media

events, focus groups, presentations, representation on state and national committees, mentoring in K-12 schools and involvement in training at universities, our partnerships with other educational groups are growing. This council provides a go-to resource for legislators and colleagues, and allows our voice to be heard while modeling best practices for both teaching practice and for bringing educators and policy makers together.

If you ask any Teacher of the Year in Colorado, he or she will share feelings of accomplishment, sadness, trepidation and excitement over what is happening in the state. Through this council, created by STOYs for the benefit of our profession and students, we stand together as leaders who now have a mechanism for expressing our views on issues of reform, our profession and the future of our students. It is becoming a cornerstone of teacher-leader advocacy in policy and practice in Colorado.

Key lessons learned:

- A strong piece of advice for educators is to teach colleagues to use time with policymakers productively. Know in advance the positions of the policy maker(s) with whom you are meeting and don't waste time trying to convince them to take a position they already embrace.
- Don't wait to be invited to the table – reach out directly to state legislators. Invite them into your classroom and ask for meetings with them.
- Know what's important for the policy maker(s) and tie your and your students' needs to those of your target audience.
- Work to build on-going relationships, not one-time meetings or engagements. Offer to establish an educator advisory council that could serve as a go-to body of educators for state legislators to tap into when they need to know what educators think about a particular issue.
- In an initial meeting, you are likely to get ten minutes with a policy maker or staffer. Make your key points up front. Do not spend this precious time in complaining – be proactive.

Hybrid Roles: Bridging Policy Development and the Classroom

One specific model of interaction with state policymakers is that of the hybrid teacher role, in which the teacher spends part of his or her time in the classroom and part working directly with state legislators.

There are various models of hybrid roles for educators, some of which show promise. One of these is the Teacherpreneur model being piloted by the Center for Teaching Quality, which lets teacher leaders spend part of the day in their own classroom and part of the day serving in teacher leader roles. What does this look like? In some instances, teachers serve in their own classrooms for half the teaching day and spend the other half-day working with other teachers to model lessons, coach or mentor.

In others, the half-day away from their classroom is spent working with policy agencies such as state departments of education or state legislative bodies. In still others, the time out of their classroom is spent working with local colleges and universities on teacher preparation programs; with community organizations to get them interested in education; or with corporations, helping them to engage with the schools in their areas.

Teachers participating in hybrid roles often struggle to find their place, sometimes feeling that they are not fully part of the classroom or the policy arena. In addition, there are sometimes issues with locating these educators in the compensation structure and bargaining agreements between unions or associations and districts. These issues of compensation, contracts and culture will need to be addressed directly in order for hybrid roles to succeed. In instances where they are successful, the role of the administrator is critical.

Willingness by administrators to find creative solutions to scheduling issues, recognition of the advantages to the school and district of having a teacher in a hybrid role, and openness to bringing new ideas into the school are the hallmarks of administrators who have made hybrid roles work as in the case described by NNSTOY board members and the classroom teacher below.

Openness to bringing new ideas into the school are the hallmarks of administrators who have made hybrid roles work.

Educator Perspective: Christopher Poulos
Connecticut State Teacher of the Year 2007
Aspen Teacher Leader Fellow, 2012
National Board Certified Teacher
Hope Street Fellow
Vice President, National Network of State Teachers of the Year Board of Directors

For the past two school years I have had the unique opportunity of splitting my time between teaching in my district and serving as a Teacher-Leader in Residence at the Connecticut State Department of Education. In this hybrid role, I have been able to work alongside policy leaders making decisions that impact public education while reflecting on my classroom practice and representing teachers and students at the state level.

My hybrid position has allowed me to lead from the classroom. At school, I have co-taught Spanish classes, served as a peer coach, worked one-on-one with English Language Learners and served on K-12 committees aimed at improving curriculum, professional development and the teacher evaluation processes. At the department, I have focused my time on teacher engagement and outreach, bringing teachers and state education leaders together to discuss the benefits and challenges of current policy initiatives. The goal of such convenings and committees is to explore viable approaches and constructive solutions that promote educational progress and innovation.

In both of my roles, I have worked to bridge the gap between policy and practice. I have had the opportunity to clarify the rationale for various policy initiatives and explain the benefits to students. By involving teachers, I also have helped policymakers understand the implications of their decisions on classroom practice. This two-way approach to engagement has resulted in increased collaboration between teachers and policymakers. The resulting

partnerships have allowed teams of stakeholders to craft policies that enhance the conditions for teaching and learning, ultimately better serving the students that we teach.

Early in 2014, Stefan Pryor, the Connecticut Education Commissioner, committed to a series of meetings centered on supporting educators as they implement educator evaluation. At these interactive, solution-oriented gatherings, a group of 20 teachers from different districts worked closely with the commissioner, his chief officers and CSDE staff to share their experiences related to the implementation of the state's new educator evaluation procedures. These conversations were ongoing, rather than a one-time event. The discussions generated a list of supports that CSDE could provide to shift the focus of teacher evaluation from checklists and protocols to relevant professional learning and improved outcomes for students.

My hybrid position has not been without challenges. I discovered early on that current education systems are not designed to accommodate hybrid roles. Even with an invitation from the commissioner of education and the support of my local board of education, the process for formalizing my role required two memorandums of agreement and six weeks of negotiations, as scheduling logistics and contract language had to be considered.

Once I assumed my position, I realized quickly that it was up to me to define my role, and that I would have to advocate tirelessly to justify my work both at school and the CSDE. Virtually all my training as a teacher leader was on the job. I learned government protocols and the policy process by trial and error, and with fellow teachers, learned quickly how to navigate controversial conversations at the lunchroom table. I have found that the key to my success as a teacher leader has been to offer input, make decisions and clarify complicated concepts by acknowledging challenges and presenting solutions in the context of what is best for students.

Based on what we have collectively learned and accomplished, the CSDE, my district administration and my local union have seen value in my hybrid role and have agreed to extend my position for an additional year. I am thankful for the continued opportunity to serve students and my profession with tweaked roles that will allow for more autonomy at the CSDE and additional opportunities to teach and coach peers at school. What offers me the most hope is that the CSDE has decided to bring on four additional Teacher-Leaders in Residence to further the work I have begun. Through collaboration and the shared vision that teacher leadership is a means for better serving students, I look forward to working with these new colleagues and future generations of ambassadors from the classroom to foster the shift toward a teacher-led, student centered profession.

Key lessons learned:

- Establishing hybrid roles will require negotiation with unions, districts, building-level administrators, and, in some cases, the SEA.
- We will need to shift culture so that the concept of an educator in a hybrid role is accepted by both peers and administrators.
- Hybrid roles need to be clearly defined – what will the educator actually be doing and to whom is the educator accountable.
- The role of the building-level administrator is critical in order for hybrid roles to succeed.

Advancing Teacher Leadership Through Policy at the National and International Levels

Our National Teachers of the Year have opportunities to influence policy at the national and international levels. As part of their Year of Recognition, NTOYs travel to other countries, serving as both teachers and learners, as well as ambassadors for American education. They bring to these countries examples of practice and learn what is working in other nations' schools. In addition, these educators become respected voices on education policy issues and more readily have the ear of lawmakers in the United States.

Other teachers have the opportunity to travel abroad, examining education systems in other nations as well. Educators such as David Bosso, Connecticut STOY 2012, travel extensively during the summers, seeking out fellowships that enhance their own skills and strengthen those of teachers in other countries. Bosso states: "The opportunity to travel and work with other teachers throughout our country and abroad has been incredibly enriching and empowering. Such potent professional growth endeavors have cultivated a stronger understanding of the challenges many teachers and students face, a greater realization of the potential of effective teacher leadership, and an enhanced appreciation for the universal aspects of teaching and learning. Most significantly, these experiences have underscored the power of education in peoples' lives and the need to fervently uphold larger humanistic ideals."

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This kind of diplomacy opens doors to new ways of thinking about impacting policy and provides educators with needed skills in doing so.

STOYs are currently working with a group of educators in China through the Center for Educator Effectiveness at Pearson, conducting a research study comparing and contrasting teacher preparation in the United States and China. A second group of STOYs was recently in Shanghai, visiting schools and working with educators, both learning and teaching.

These programs help teachers in both the U.S. and other countries to better understand their roles in shaping and implementing policy. This kind of diplomacy opens doors to new ways of thinking about impacting policy and provides educators with needed skills in doing so, as one STOY shares here.

Educator's Perspective: Rebecca Mieliwocki 2012 California and National Teacher of the Year

After President Obama named me the 2012 National Teacher of the Year in a ceremony at the White House, I had the opportunity to travel throughout the country and across the globe representing America's 3.2 million public school teachers. On behalf of all teachers, I was able to express publicly ideas, concerns, solutions and passions concerning teachers and public schools, and what it takes to provide a free, engaging and rigorous education for all students. Reflecting on my year representing teachers, what stands out are four moments in which I was able to open a dialogue, redirect a conversation toward topics of more interest and importance for educators, or shed light on a critical issue in education policy.

First, during my White House acceptance speech, in front of Arne Duncan and the president, I was able to convey

how incredibly hard American educators work to help students overcome not just achievement gaps, but opportunity gaps, hunger gaps, access gaps, love gaps, and more.

Second, during a meeting of the Education Commission of the States meeting in Atlanta, the 2012 class of State Teachers of the Year met with Bill Gates to discuss ways to accurately assess teachers' strengths and help them develop and grow, instead of using data and metrics to find and fire the worst teachers. Gates listened intently and actively as teacher after teacher shared ideas for how to evaluate teachers to determine what makes the best teachers so good and how to help them continue to grow.

Third, at the annual meeting of the Council of Chief State School Officers in Savannah, Ga., I delivered an impassioned plea to carefully consider what measures should be included in teacher evaluations. I spoke about teachers' passion, engagement and professionalism, and how to retain them. I also spoke against relying too heavily on test scores in making personnel decisions. That practice is not only irresponsible and unscientific, it undervalues the work teachers do to support their students emotionally, socially and academically. I also said excessive use of test scores in evaluations undermines the profession. Afterward, Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Mitchell D. Chester interrogated me on my ideas. When state chiefs talk with teachers, the knottiest of issues become clearer and easier to address.

The fourth and most powerful opportunity to advocate on behalf of teachers came at the International Summit on the Teaching Profession in Amsterdam. In front of an audience of nearly 2,000 that included education ministers and policymakers from around the world, I argued in favor of authentic assessment of educators. As an example of how effective that can be, I described ways my principal helped me become the National Teacher of the Year. My remarks were the most widely tweeted of the conference and were mentioned in the closing remarks of representatives of New Zealand, Estonia, Denmark, the Netherlands and other countries. Those speakers said authentic assessment is vital to efforts to truly elevate the profession and improve outcomes for children everywhere.

Finally, most recently, I led a group of four STOYs on an international visit to Shanghai at the invitation of the Shanghai Education Foundation. The purpose of this visit was to share best educational practices from the United States with Chinese educators, and to learn from them. We spoke to over 10,000 educators from across a wide swath of both Shanghai and Shenzhen, China, in a true exchange of ideas that strengthened practice both in China and in the United States. The fact that other countries seek opportunities to learn from us, tells us that we are doing something right.

Key lessons learned:

- Establish a clear plan for sharing lessons learned from international experiences; this has to be more than one educator getting to travel abroad and see another nation's system in action. How will you share what you've learned with your school, district, SEA, Federal agencies?
- Understand cultural norms of the country you are visiting before you go.
- Be sure to teach as well as to learn.
- Other countries believe that they have much to learn from the American education system.
- Be a strong advocate.

Shaping Policy Through Relationships with Unions and Organizations

While working with policymakers is certainly the most direct route to shaping and influencing education policy, it is also possible to affect policy by working through interest groups such as teachers unions and other education-related national organizations.

The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association are two of the most powerful influencers of education policy. Because these organizations represent educators, their positions are often assumed to be those of all educators. While both unions engage educators in shaping their own policy views, they have recognized the need to do so even more actively. As a result, we have seen position papers released by both organizations in recent years that contributed important ideas for strengthening education policy and systems. Often, unions offer teachers their first opportunities in teacher leadership.

In addition to our unions, there are many education think tanks that seek to shape policy via research and advocacy. In part because of the efforts of NNSTOY and other teacher-led organizations, some of these organizations are beginning to consult educators more regularly. NNSTOY has developed strong working relationships with over two dozen such organizations. We recognize that only by developing relationships can we be partners “at the table, rather than being on the menu,” as Jane West, former senior vice president for policy at the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, has said. Organizations such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Center for American Progress have actively sought ideas from numerous teacher voice groups, including ours. The Center for Great Teachers and Leaders frequently invites educators to present at its conferences, serve on discussion panels and advisory boards, and partner in research.

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The Fordham Institute has offered NNSTOY a venue for the release of our publications. The Council of Chief State School Officers teaches STOYs in their Year of Recognition, immersing them in education policy and empowering them to raise their teacher voices. In collaboration with the Hunt Institute, National PTA, AFT and NEA we have produced four special episodes of [The Ignite Show](#), an online talk show for educators, focused on the Common Core State Standards’ implementation.

These partnerships offer two-way benefits. The organizations that seek them have access to the views and experiences of outstanding teachers, which can then be used to inform their own decisions and policies. For the teacher leaders and NNSTOY, we are given the opportunity to affect policy through our advocacy for students, teachers and the profession. Below, a STOY shares her experience with partnerships.

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Educator's Perspective: Maddie Fennell
Nebraska State Teacher of the Year 2007
Chair, NEA Commission on Effective Teaching and Teachers
Board Member, Nebraska State Education Association
Board Member, National Network of State Teachers of the Year
United States Education Department Classroom Teaching Ambassador 2014-2015
Co-Chair, Teach to Lead Initiative

In the fall of 2010 I was at the National Education Association in Washington, D.C., to attend a meeting of the NEA Professional Standards and Practices Committee. As I was joining the meeting late, I ran into Dennis Van Roekel, NEA president and my mentor for more than 20 years. Dennis had a question for me: Would I chair the independent commission of accomplished teachers that he was forming to study the teaching profession and provide substantive recommendations regarding reform from the educator perspective? Butterflies took flight in my stomach as I agreed, thrilled to be at the table of education reform but wondering if I had the skills necessary to lead such a prestigious group of educators. Saying yes was the beginning a voyage in teacher leadership that engulfed my life for the next 14 months and continues today.

The Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching brought together 21 highly accomplished educators, most still teaching every day, whose primary task was crafting a new vision of a teaching profession that is led by teachers and ensures teacher and teaching effectiveness. Meeting during a tumultuous spring that saw union rights stripped and contracts dismantled, we had a choice: Do we build an airbag to soften the fall or an airplane to take our profession to new heights? Of course, we knew the airplane was our only real option.

So began the arduous task of detaching ourselves from the current framework for teaching so we could envision a new reality. We held panel discussions with academics, political leaders and philanthropists; we crossed the country on a listening tour, engaging our colleagues in our work. We developed an advisory committee of education leaders to act as our sounding board and push us past our comfort levels. After leading this group of teacher leaders in brainstorming, arguing, laughing, reading, digesting, listening, bargaining and learning, I joked that we should have been awarded some kind of advanced degrees! Calling upon my facilitation skills and building consensus around highly contentious issues was a major leap forward in my own teacher leadership.

The commission work made me a better teacher as I incorporated what I was learning into my own practice; when I shared information about peer observation with my school staff, we developed a program to observe each other and share best practices that still continues today. My network of colleagues, understanding of education systems and knowledge of professions (especially education) were vastly expanded. While helping to grow teacher leaders by leading this journey into education policy, practice and advocacy, my own teacher leadership was expanded.

Chairing the commission was like leading a classroom of gifted students — challenging, humbling and extremely rewarding. I am proud of our final report, [Transforming Teaching: Connecting Professional Responsibility with Student Learning](#) because it reflects the passion every teacher has to be valued as a professional making a difference in the lives of students. I am also proud of this work because it offered a group of passionate teachers the avenue through which to truly develop skills as teacher leaders. Every one of us continues to share these skills with other educators, growing new teacher leaders to advance the profession.

Key lessons learned:

- Unions and other organizations have much to teach about policy and offer another avenue of access to policy makers.

- Understand your charge and be clear about the messages that you are, and are not, willing to send while working with your union or other agency.
- Work to build long-term relationships with unions and other agencies that can be productive in working together to shape policy in productive ways.

Educators Serving as Policymakers

There are numerous examples of educators who have engaged directly in policy as legislators. Additionally, many members of Congress are former educators themselves. They include Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Sen. Casey Brown (D-Pa.), Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.), Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wa.) Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) and Sen. John Tester (D-Mont.).

These legislators, coming from the classroom, have a direct connection to teaching and learning and bring a deeply valuable insight into the impact of policy on students, teachers and systems.

Among NNSTOY members alone, we have several educators who have run for public office. These include Bob Williams, Alaska STYO 2009, who recently conceded the Democratic primary election for lieutenant governor after a year-long, hard-fought effort in Alaska, and Jeff Hinton, who ran for his state Assembly the same year he was named Nevada's STYO 2014. Through efforts such as these, educators learn much about the political process and are encouraged to engage in it personally.

Another such example is Holly Franks Boffy, Louisiana STYO 2010, who successfully ran for and serves on the Louisiana State Board of Education. Holly's story is below.

These legislators, coming from the classroom, have a direct connection to teaching and learning and bring a deeply valuable insight into the impact of policy on students, teachers and systems.

Educator Perspective: Holly Boffy
Louisiana State Teacher of the Year 2010
Educator in Residence, Council of Chief State School Officers
Member, Louisiana State Board of Education

My son, Pierce, has a rare condition called osteogenesis imperfecta (OI). OI causes his bones to break easily. He broke his femur a few months before I decided to run for office. As we sat in the hospital room trying to deal with immediate needs, like figuring out how to take a 4-year-old in a lower body cast to the restroom and the long-term concerns about how the condition would affect our lives, all I wanted to do was run. This was a strange feeling for me because I was not a runner. So I trained for and ran a 5K, but the desire still wasn't fulfilled.

The 5K was followed by a phone call from a friend asking me to run for the state board and promising to support me along the way. The first thing I saw after hanging up was my son, still 4, trying for the fourth time to learn how to walk. His courage and determination inspired me.

Pierce's influence didn't stop at inspiration. Being his mom has taught me the importance of advocacy and created a sense of urgency within me. As I contemplated the opportunity to run for the state board, the children who do not have advocates motivated me. I also thought about how my home state ranks so low on measures that matter the most to children.

My experiences as the 2010 Louisiana State Teacher of the Year also influenced my decision to run as well. The

closer I became to the decision-makers, the more confident I became that I could serve as one. Watching my fellow STOYs work to create the Teachers at the Table policy at the federal level and reshape the NNSTOY also inspired me to serve.

Stepping out of the classroom and onto the state board gave me a clearer picture of what I can only describe as a gap between teachers and policymakers. I spend a lot of time trying to help policymakers understand the perspectives of teachers and vice versa. My experiences have reinforced to me that relationships are just as important to policymaking as they are to teaching.

Moving forward I will work to establish and build relationships with my representatives and offer my expertise to them. No policymaker can be an expert at everything. They seek people to rely on. I'll build these relationships over cups of coffee when a vote isn't pending. I'll send handwritten notes of encouragement when policymakers are challenged and notes of appreciation when they support my causes. I'll also keep my emails and testimony genuine and concise.

Another lesson I learned from this experience is to know policy. I now realize some of my most frustrating experiences as a teacher were the result of misinterpretations of policy. Moving forward I will check the actual policies and know where to seek waivers when necessary.

These lessons weren't learned without sacrifices. Political campaigns are brutal, and public service is difficult. However, I recommend it to anyone with the courage, determination and desire to serve.

Key lessons learned:

- Relationship-building is as important to policy makers as it is to educators; know this and use this information productively.
- Policy makers need, and want, to hear from stakeholders.
- No policy maker is an expert in everything; each needs to rely on a network of experts in specific fields in order to make good decisions.
- Know and understand existing policies before you meet with a policy maker.

Supporting Engagement in Policy Through Teacher Leadership

So how do we create the kind of teacher leaders who would willingly take the steps to engage with policymakers, demand their attention and be informed partners in crafting policy? We cannot rely on what Mark Smylie calls the “anoint and appoint” model of teacher leadership, in which a great teacher – gifted in working with students – is tapped by an administrator to serve in the role of a leader. Too often, these magically transformed Shazaam! teacher leaders are unprepared and therefore ineffective in working with adult learners, let alone with policymakers. Training, education and practice are needed to develop great teachers into great teacher leaders.

At NNSTOY, we are building some of that training through professional learning modules based on the [Teacher Leader Model Standards](#), available to any teacher. We work to find opportunities for STOYs and Finalists to engage them as teacher leaders, after they have been trained to do so.

In their recent book, *Teachers at the Table*, the Center for Great Teachers and Leaders stated, “Sound and authentic teacher engagement informs the design of teacher evaluation by drawing on the knowledge of those closest to the problem. In doing so, it minimizes unintended consequences and communication gaffes that can impede and even derail implementation. It legitimizes the new policy and fosters a sense of shared responsibility for its success that makes it more durable and sustainable. It also opens up channels of communication and builds trust and capacity to resolve other issues educators need to address, from school safety to technology-enhanced pedagogy.”

Rebecca Mieliwoki, California and National Teacher of the Year 2012, was asked to reflect on how we might establish, as a norm, a culture in which teachers were regularly consulted in policy decision-making, at the local, state and national levels.

Rebecca shared:



For teachers to grow into true leaders, they need a community of support starting with a great principal who says “yes” more than he or she says “no.” Teachers need collaborative, positive, passionate co-workers who believe we are all a work in progress and that the school's mission is to grow kids into great people. Finally, we need supportive communities of parents and stakeholders who spend time and money supporting not just their own children in the schools, but providing funding and experiences for ALL kids and teachers in and outside of school.

Those three things grow great teachers who become de facto leaders. From there, it is incumbent upon the teacher herself to seek out a strong personal understanding of the issues facing her profession, from who's in charge to who's leading the changes, to how to connect with both groups to make the right kinds of impact. We must get and stay connected and do the work we need to do to make sure our profession grows and is supported in the proper way.

My rationale for this thinking is twofold: First, many people assume that the way to leadership is paved by someone else's actions or by being granted permission from some outside authority. Not so. Most great teacher leaders started with a dogged passion all their own and were tireless about making things happen in their classrooms, at their schools and in their communities. This purposeful professional work is us building ourselves into leaders, not because someone gave us a green light, but because we wanted it on our own. Part of that work, though, is being tied to people who are supportive and allow us chances to shine. Without like-minded collaborators, it's a slow slog. When people are in sync, though, the sky's the limit.

At NNSTOY, we wholeheartedly agree with Rebecca.

Key lessons learned:

- Just as teachers are trained, we must train teachers to serve as teacher leaders.
- We need to see cultural shifts in schools, so that teacher leadership as a role is embraced by teachers and administrators.
- Establishing distributed leadership models is a critical first step to implementing a system of teacher leadership that will thrive.
- Building trust is critical in order for a teacher leader to be accepted in his/her role.
- Teacher leaders must have credibility with their colleagues and with administrators.
- Teacher leaders must have a clear understanding of their own role and where they fit into the school structure.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

They view continuing relationships with policymakers as valuable to them as well as to colleagues, the teaching profession, policymakers and, most important, students.

Every STOY interviewed for this paper has continued to positively interact with policymakers even after their Year of Recognition as a STOY ended. They view continuing relationships with policymakers as valuable to them as well as to colleagues, the teaching profession, policymakers and, most important, students. STOYs expressed a desire to see more teachers get involved in partnering with policymakers and a belief that policies could be more effective if teachers helped both develop and implement these policies.

In order for this to occur, STOYs consulted for this paper made the following recommendations.

For Educators:

- Learning about policymaking should be a part of every teacher's preparation. We encourage teacher preparation programs to include coursework on education policy that would provide students with an understanding of the policy making process and the fundamentals of how to engage with it.
- Teachers should be trained in the skills they need to build relationships outside the classroom and to be effective as advocates — how to communicate effectively with different audiences, work with colleagues as leaders and recognize that there are different, valid perspectives on policy questions, and how to compromise. NNSTOY and other organizations currently provide these types of trainings, which need to be offered on a larger scale by exemplary educators who have been successful in these interactions.
- Teachers should be trained in accessing, analyzing and using research to support policy proposals. This training should be part of every teacher preparation program and a key facet of professional development.
- Teachers should educate themselves about the education policy issues critical in their state and nationally. They should be prepared to speak knowledgeably with policymakers about the real issues all teachers face, not just about their own.

- Principal preparation programs should include education in utilizing distributed leadership models that encourage the involvement of teacher leaders in appropriate ways to assist in building leadership, and setting school and district policies.
- Teachers should reach out to legislators, rather than waiting for legislators to reach out to teachers. Teachers should invite their legislators into their classrooms, engage them in discussions about key education issues and offer opportunities to interact with students. These opportunities can be hugely beneficial to students, educators and legislators.

For Policymakers:

- Congress should further develop processes and legislative provisions to ensure expert teachers provide input and feedback in the policy process, including drafting, implementation, revision and evaluation.
- Policymakers should reach out more actively to educators. Policy that is shaped and informed by the experiences of teachers is going to be better education policy. Making time to bring educators in for discussion sessions about specific aspects of policy, having a cadre of educators they can reach out to for advice, and accepting invitations from teachers to visit their classrooms are light lifts in making this happen.
- Every state legislature should have an educator advisory council. The opportunities to influence policy created by organizations such as NNSTOY and others should be emulated in state legislatures and district practice. Such organizations offer models to learn from but they will be insufficient to accommodate the great desire teachers have to learn to influence policy outside their classrooms.
- States and districts should establish and support hybrid roles, in which teachers continue to teach part-time while also having opportunities to influence policy at every level.
- Fellowships should be created to let educators serve federal and state legislatures in similar ways that Teacher Ambassador Fellows serve the USED.
- Legislatures, both state and federal, should develop mechanisms to maximize direct input from expert education practitioners to greatly increase the likelihood that policies will have the desired positive impact on students.

Education policy implementation does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it occurs in a highly complex education system that few outside of the system understand. Many policymakers are not involved in this system at a level required to understand how education policy actually looks when enacted in a classroom.

In his interaction with policymakers, one STOY shared that he sees his role as that of a translator. As a STOY, he convinced more than one policymaker that well-crafted, well-meaning policies often fall apart once implemented and that teacher input could help avoid unintended outcomes. This same STOY talked about the challenge of overcoming the idea that everyone is an expert on schools and teaching because everyone has attended school; many policymakers have children enrolled in schools as well.

At NNSTOY, we constantly strive to place STOYs and Finalists in positions in which they can influence policy and to train them to seek those opportunities on their own.

Most recently, we contributed to a shift in thinking about tying educator evaluation to student scores on Common Core State Standards assessments before those assessments were validated for the purpose of educator evaluation, and educators were fully prepared to implement the standards. We invited Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to our national

Many policymakers are not involved in this system at a level required to understand how education policy actually looks when enacted in a classroom.

conference in Philadelphia to engage with us in a conversation about these issues. In this conversation, STOYs spoke honestly about their experiences and their ideas about how to improve the testing situation, and, shortly after we were invited to participate in a call with senior officials wrestling with the testing issue. In reaching out to teachers for input, USED asked specifically if they could talk with NNSTOYS about the issue. Shortly thereafter, we were invited to another call with senior staff and the announcement that a shift in policy thinking had been made.

This example of shifting policy occurred because of strong relationships that we had carefully built with staff at USED and with the Secretary himself. Through relationships comes trust. Without this trust, there is no influence. Relationship building is a two-way process. Educators who do not reach out to build relationships with policymakers and then complain about not being involved in the process are misguided. As one of our STOYs told the secretary at the conference, “We are tired of waiting to be invited to come to someone else’s table. We have set our own table and are inviting you to come to it.”

“We are tired of waiting to be invited to come to someone else’s table. We have set our own table and are inviting you to come to it.”

We call upon educators to educate themselves about critical policy issues at the local, state and national levels. Further, we urge them to know their legislators – find out who represents them, who chairs the education committees in their states, who serves on their local and state boards of education — and reach out to these individuals with invitations to visit schools and classrooms, to meet and exchange ideas. We encourage educators to make their views known through letters to the editor in local and state papers, write blog pieces for organizations and work collectively to influence policy.

We call upon policy thinkers, influencers and makers to get to know the teachers in their jurisdictions, to seek out opportunities to actually get into the schools and see firsthand what happens in the classroom every day. Further, we encourage them to reach out to teachers for their thoughts on key pieces of policy before these are formulated, ask educators to gather views from their colleagues for sharing, use social media to connect with educators, and actively develop relationships with educators.

Communication is a two-way street. Both educators and the policy community need to do a better job of building and maintaining an open dialog to ensure that policies are informed by excellent teachers and therefore yield the best outcomes for students. After all, that is the shared goal of teachers and policymakers.

References

(Endnotes)

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