



Report on Activities at the TESOL Policy and Advocacy Summit in Washington, D.C., June 18th-20th, 2017

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Do you read headlines about education budgets and feel a sense of rising panic? Are your students' needs always met by your institution? Are your students consistently safe, respected, and cared for? Is your institution able to hire and retain the best and brightest? If you have a story to tell in response to any of these questions, it may be time to start advocating.

Last June, three WAESOL board members traveled to Washington, D.C. to attend the TESOL Advocacy and Policy Summit. While there, we attended advocacy training, and then we put our new skills to work in Capitol Hill meetings with lawmakers from Washington State. Our delegation was led by WAESOL Executive Director, Dr. Joan Johnston Nelson who participated in her fifth TESOL Advocacy Day. Representing both WAESOL and WABE (the Washington Association of Bilingual Educators), was Jeanne-Marie Wright, who attended for the second time. This was my first time doing advocacy with policymakers, and I learned so much, fellow WAESOL educators! Below is a short report on what happened, followed by tips you can use to expand your reach and strengthen your advocacy. If you've got issues, finding a way to make a difference can help you keep your sanity and feel empowered.



Michelle Roth and Joan Johnston Nelson at the Capitol Building in Washington, DC.

Training

The TESOL Advocacy training was two days chock full of great information. Organizers provided us with very well-written guides and overviews of current legislation that affects federal K-12 funding ([ESSA](#)) as well as adult education ([WIOA](#)). We heard speakers from the Department of Education, including Jose Viana, the brand new director of the Office of English Language Acquisition, as well as from Chris Coro of the Office of Career and Technical Education. There were speakers from the [Migration Policy Institute](#), the [National Skills Coalition](#), and the [American Federation of Teachers](#). These groups gave us valuable information about national trends for English Language Learners of all ages. By the end of the training, we had a plan of action and talking points to bring with us on our scheduled Capitol Hill visits. We also came away with an understanding that advocacy is education. We were well-prepared to go forth and educate lawmakers about issues that affect us.

Meetings with a Senator, Congressional Representatives, and Senior Staff

Along with the other Washingtonians participating in the TESOL Advocacy Day, the first meeting was in the Hart Senate Office Building where staffers for the committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) craft education policy (among other things). If you followed the news on health care last June, you will understand that our Senator, Patty Murray, as ranking member of the HELP Committee, was extremely busy with healthcare and unable to meet with us in person. However, we did sit down with one of Senator Murray's Education Policy Advisors to discuss how the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has been playing out for K-12 educators in Washington State. This was my first such meeting, and I was impressed with how knowledgeable and interested this staffer was. After listening for a while, it became clear that I was sitting at a table with someone who had actually had a hand in crafting ESSA, and here she was, taking notes and getting feedback from people on the ground. It was a fascinating window into how policy comes into being. There are real people, working as a team behind the scenes, all trying to do the right thing. I work in adult education, and funding for my programs come from WIOA rather than ESSA. In the past, Senator Murray had one person who worked on education



Jeanne-Marie Wright, Roth, and Nelson at Senator Patty Murray's office.

policy of all kinds, but now, her team is becoming specialized, and a different staffer deals with workforce development and adult education. The policy advisor we talked to, however, kindly put me in touch with someone, and now I have a contact in the Senate HELP Committee office. That's a great start. Next time, I'll remember that sometimes, our group should stick together, and other times, we should make individual appointments. If there's a chance to talk to a staffer who crafts legislation, make sure to talk to the staffer that specializes in your funding stream. If you're talking to a politician or high-ranking staff member, go in a group, and talk about general trends.



Wright, Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler, and Roth.

Later that afternoon, we crossed over to the House side of the hill, where Jeanne-Marie Wright and I had a 30 minute face-to-face meeting with Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler of Washington's 3rd congressional district. Jeanne-Marie and I both live in Southwest Washington, in the 3rd congressional district, so we were able to talk to a member of the House HELP Appropriations Committee as constituents. This felt very lucky, indeed. The House Appropriations Committees are the ones who decide exactly how much money to spend on bills that have been authorized. We asked for full funding for ESSA and WIOA, noting that even rolling over funding levels from previous years are effectively cuts for us, since our student populations are growing, and our costs increase year to year. The White House budget proposal recommended drastic cuts in funding for both ESSA and WIOA, but the Congresswoman assured us that she and colleagues in the majority party did not intend to simply adopt the White House budget. However, she and her party are philosophically inclined toward reducing both taxes and spending. She said that, with budgets, "it is never a choice between a bad thing and a good thing. It's always a choice between two good things." We assured her that we understood this, but hoped she would consider educating all children and developing our workforce to be good things worth choosing. WIOA funding has decreased by 40% since 2001, according to the National Skills Coalition. If funding isn't increased, we would be unable to meet the worthy goals of the bipartisan Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. I let our Congresswoman know that, where I work, in the Clark College service area, there are 25,000 adults who do not speak English

well. That's more than the entire population of her hometown, Camas. She and her staffer said, "Wow!" and wrote that down. I will have to count that as a small victory.



Nelson, Senator Maria Cantwell, and Roth.

The next day, Joan and I got to speak at length with Senator Maria Cantwell's Deputy Chief of Staff. Later we even got to meet the Senator herself for a photo op. Senator Cantwell stressed the importance of Community and Technical Colleges and apprenticeship programs, and that was nice to hear. She and her staff had just gone to Switzerland to look at how Europeans structure apprenticeships. She is thinking about offering tax cuts to companies that train workers on the job and later hire those workers full-time. She also wanted to have oversight of such programs "to make sure that you're actually learning something on the job." I thought that was compelling, and I wonder how high schools and community/technical colleges might fit in to such a program. Senator Cantwell did sponsor such a bill, but it appears that it has not gotten out of committee. Bipartisan enthusiasm for apprenticeship programs and workforce development continues to run high on Capitol Hill and in Olympia, so it will be interesting to see how these trends continue to play out in federal and state budgets.

On the final day, Joan Johnston Nelson, a constituent of Washington's 5th congressional district, met with Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers and discussed the refugee populations in Spokane-area adult education and K-12 programs. Joan extended invitations to the offices of Representative McMorris Rodgers, Senator Murray, and Senator Cantwell, encouraging them to come visit the Summer Language Program at Gonzaga University in Spokane. In this program, ESSA Title III Refugee Impact Funds are used to help refugee students learn English through Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM). Both Murray and McMorris Rodgers staff took the time to visit the program and even attended the final day celebration. They were very impressed and offered to assist in any way they could to continue the program.

Capitol Hill is just the beginning

Advocating for our profession is part of the WAESOL mission, so we will be sending two board members to Washington, D.C for the next Policy and Advocacy Summit in June 2018. This

summer, we will begin new conversations and continue developing relationships with policymakers whose work affects us. If there are issues you would like us to address, or messages you would like us to carry to Capitol Hill, don't hesitate to get in touch. We would love to hear from you.

Tips for becoming an advocate

One thing I learned from this experience is that anyone can be an advocate. If you are worried or bothered by the state of our profession or the situations our students find themselves in, advocacy can become a way to renew your optimism and regain a sense of control. Action is better than worrying, and there are steps you can take toward positive changes. If I can, you can, too.



1. **Define the problem(s) that mean the most to you.** Sit down and make a list of things that bother or scare you. Which ones do you see as most vital?
2. **Look for opportunities.** Some problems can be fixed, and some are out of our control. A problem you can fix is an opportunity.
3. **Learn who your allies are.** Talk to colleagues and find out which of your concerns are systemic. Who among you shares your concerns?
4. **Get together to share ideas.** Discuss with like-minded people what you think are the roots of a problem. What would it look like if the problem you identified didn't exist?
5. **Find out who the players are.** Who ultimately has the power to make the change you'd like to see? Are you talking about a policy that comes from your institution? Is your institution responding to the constraints of a state or federal law or some other outside agency? Does your institution receive funding from a state or federal grant? Which ones? What effect does the grant have on your ability to do what you want to do? Are you dependent on marketing and recruiting students, and do you have to communicate your value in a competitive marketplace? If so, is that being done effectively?

6. **Ask an administrator you trust (nicely) to learn more about the laws and grants that define your institution.** If someone has recently written a grant application, ask to read it. Understand that, if a grant is accepted, the institution is then obliged to follow the plan laid out in the grant application exactly, or risk losing funding. This may answer a lot of questions you may have about “Why can’t we...?” or “Why do we have to...?” If you have a good relationship with your administrators, you may discover that they share your concerns, or maybe they don’t! But this is a good place to start thinking about policies you’d like to change.
7. **Become a source of feedback.** Educate policymakers. You’re an educator! You do this all the time in the classroom, but consider the fact that there are good people trying to set policy who need information that you have. Don’t let them work in a vacuum. Reach out and let policymakers know how their good intentions are playing out in the real world. If you don’t tell them, maybe no one will. You don’t have to become an adversary. Work from a place of shared values. Be willing to offer an alternative and make it clear you’re dedicated to working toward that change together.
8. **Have a specific ask.** Write to school boards and state and federal lawmakers. Find out what actions they are taking, and let them know how you’d like them to proceed.
9. **Appeal to the head and the heart.** Start collecting interesting facts that support your view, and be ready to share them. When asking for money, be prepared to show the good that you do, and consider framing your ask in terms of return on investment. Combine hard facts with stories that are rich in detail, so you can bring a human face to the issues that concern you.
10. **Follow the news, and explore resources.** For more information about ESSA, WIOA, Immigration and Refugee Concerns, check out [TESOL Advocacy](#). For communication templates, take a look at [ISTE’s Advocacy Toolkit](#). Dive deep with a good book on the subject, *Advocating for English Learners*.