

Report on Activities at the TESOL Advocacy and Policy Summit in Washington, D.C., June 18th-20th, 2018

Michelle Roth

Clark College

This year, WAESOL board members and other advocates from Washington State were on Capitol Hill when senators announced an end to the separation of migrant children from their families at the southern border. As immigration and education continue to be hot topics, TESOL advocacy is more important than ever.

In June, three WAESOL board members joined a growing number educators from Washington and across the United States at the TESOL Advocacy and Policy Summit in Washington, DC. We received further advocacy training and current policy updates, then we set out for Capitol Hill to meet with lawmakers. Our delegation included WAESOL Executive Director, Dr. Joan Johnston Nelson who participated in her sixth TESOL Advocacy Day. Representing both WAESOL and WABE (the Washington Association of Bilingual Educators), was Jeanne-Marie Wright, who attended for the third time. This was my second year, and we joined forces with other WAESOL members and WABE officers to create one of the largest state delegations in attendance at the TESOL Advocacy and Policy Summit this year. Together, we had 12 Capitol Hill visits, meeting with 3 senators, 5 representatives, and a handful of legislative assistants. In addition, we had focused, in-depth meetings with Senate HELP Committee staffers who wrote ESSA (K-12) and WIOA (Adult Basic Education) legislation.

Training

The TESOL Advocacy training was two days of policy updates and practical advice for creating positive change. TESOL provided us with very well-written guides and



Michelle Roth is an ESL Instructor in the Transitional Studies department at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington. She has been on the WAESOL board since 2014, and is currently serving as the President.

Michelle can be reached at:
michelle@waesol.org

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 Assistant Deputy Secretary and 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](#), the [American Federation of Teachers](#), and the [Migrant Legal Action Program](#). 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.

As we attended our information sessions and training, legislation was evolving in real time, and it was an exciting, if sometimes intense, place to be. There was tension on Capitol Hill the week we were there because there were multiple bills in the House on immigration reform, and the president had not yet met with House Republicans to solidify support for any particular bill. We heard about several proposals with exclusively one-party support, and all of them included provisions that would have varying degrees of impact on our students and their families. In the end, the president left it to legislators, and, at the time of this writing, no major, comprehensive immigration reform has moved through the House. In addition to all of that, reports had been circulating about the separation of migrant children from their families at the Mexican border as part of the administration's new "zero tolerance" policy. On the day that we had our Capitol Hill meetings, a group of senators took to the steps to announce that the administration would cease separating children from their parents, and protests were planned for the next week at the White House and in a Senate office building (in which Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal (WA-7) would be [arrested](#) along with a reported 500 other women in an act of civil disobedience.)

In short, it was a wild week to be in DC.



Michelle Roth at the Capitol Building in Washington, DC.

Several issues remain unresolved at the Department of Education which gave us pause. Among them was a proposal to eliminate the Office of English Language Acquisition and have those functions performed by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Washington Senator Patty Murray, ranking member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee was a cosigner of the [Bicameral Letter to the Department of Education](#) against this proposed move.

In addition, a major issue that concerns immigrant students is a [proposed change](#) to the way that the Department of Homeland Security interprets the “Public Charge” rule. Being a financial burden (“public charge”) is grounds for denial of permanent residency applications. In the past, this meant that applicants who were permanently unable to work, or who posed a likelihood of life-long dependence on public assistance would be ineligible for a green card. Under [new guidance](#), however, “public charge” could include applicants who avail themselves of tax credits or a wide variety of public assistance, including Medicaid and SNAP (food assistance)--even for the benefit of citizen children in their household. While tax credits, healthcare, and food aid could make an immigration application inadmissible, it appears that attendance in adult basic education programs would not. This rule change is still a proposal, but if implemented, could have a profound impact on some students’ [willingness to seek aid](#) when they need it.

There are a host of issues that concern our students, from [international student visa policies](#) to addressing the [shortage of qualified ELL instructors](#) in public schools, to legal and administrative challenges to DACA and “zero tolerance” immigration policies. TESOL maintains a list of [letters and alerts](#) to help you keep up to date, but you can sign up for alerts from major news outlets or follow advocacy groups on twitter for the latest.

Meetings with Senators, Congressional Representatives, and Senior Staff

TESOL members from Washington State began our day on Capitol Hill by meeting Senator Patty Murray at a constituent coffee meeting. We heard from the senator about her work on the HELP Committee, introduced ourselves, and had a photo



Jill Klune, Jeanne-Marie Wright, Senator Patty Murray, Rosemary Colón, Joan Johnston Nelson, and Michelle Roth pose for a picture following a meeting.

taken. After that, our delegation moved on to meet with the Deputy Chief of Staff for Senator Maria Cantwell, where we discussed issues affecting English Language Learners of all ages in Washington State. Later, we attended Senator Cantwell's constituent coffee meeting and got to shake hands with her and pause for a photo-op. Shortly after that, we split up to cover more ground. Jeanne-Marie Wright and Joan Johnston Nelson met with Senator Murray's HELP legislative assistant who works on issues related to K-12 education, while others attended meetings with Congressional Representatives from all over Washington State. Members of our group met Congressman Dave Reichert (WA-8), Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler (WA-3), Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers (WA-5), Congresswoman Suzan DelBene (WA-1), and Congressman Raul Labrador (ID-1) as well as Idaho Senators Mike Crapo and James Risch. As the only Washingtonian in our group who works in Adult Basic Education, I had an appointment with Senator Murray's HELP legislative assistant in charge of workforce development, but our meeting was postponed to a conference call, as Perkins Act reauthorization was in the midst of committee markup that day. Meeting face-to-face is always nice, but perhaps extending the conversation via email and phone has laid the groundwork for a more established relationship and sustained advocacy. At the end of my latest conversation with the legislative assistant, she asked me, "What changes would you like to see in WIOA the next time it comes up for reauthorization?" This, I think, is a good position to be in.



Michelle Roth, Senator Maria Cantwell, and Rosemary Colón pose for a picture at a meeting.



Congresswoman Jaime Hererra Beutler, Jeanne-Marie Wright, and Michelle Roth meet at an event.

Capitol Hill is just the Beginning

WAESOL plans to send two board members to Washington, D.C for the next Advocacy and Policy Summit in June 2019. 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

Anyone can be an advocate. Here are ten steps toward making the changes you want to see.

1. Define the problem(s) that mean the most to you. Sit down

and make a list of things that concern 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. If someone is asking for feedback, give it!
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 others 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. **Follow the money.** 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 obligated 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 the decision-makers. 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 them 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.** Talk with leaders in your institution. 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 Language Learners*.

Click [Here](#) to Return to the Table of Contents