

Connecting

I got to volunteer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) at a school called Africa New Day [translated from French] (UJN). The DRC is the rape capital of the world (Wilén & Ingelaere, 2017), and violence and crime are commonplace, so you can imagine it's difficult to run a school for impoverished kids who walk miles for an education. UJN could keep their eyes solely on teaching, but how could their students learn on long-empty stomachs? when they have been traumatized? when they worry for their moms and siblings who have been violated? when they have no clothes or shoes to wear to class?

A child's education is influenced by so many variables that we can't help kids if we view our work through tunnel vision. The UJN change-makers recognize this, so they further their goals by connecting with others. They collaborate with business leaders, the community, soldiers, peacekeepers, outsiders, and more to provide what is needed for the whole child: food, safety, shelter, counseling, a job for Mama, career training for an older sibling, self-defense lessons, side businesses and donations that make outreach programs sustainable, and a steady stream of volunteers to work with teachers and students. This approach pays off: I saw children beaming and thriving despite personal stories that would bring you to your knees.

Like UJN, your mission is helping students. Like UJN, your contributions will expand and multiply when you connect with others. Tunnel vision – just looking forward and not interacting with those around you on your journey – will shortchange you and the students you hope to help. You're able to contribute more to your field when you share and learn from a wider network of professionals. Connecting with new people exposes you to ideas and resources you wouldn't otherwise find and gives you more avenues to spread your own contributions. Many connections lead to friendships in which you regularly lead one another to new information-distribution opportunities.

Yet when I hear the term *network*, my natural response is to cringe. And I'm not even an introvert. This is because my initial understanding of networking

was that it meant having awkward, forced conversations with strangers in which everyone is only trying to get something from one another.

It wasn't until I actually engaged with strangers within my field that I found relationships taking form without ever trying to do the dreaded act of "networking." I wasn't "after" anything – I was just swamping ideas with the goal of helping students. I learned what effective networking really is: it is about connecting with others over shared passion.

I favor Brené Brown's definition of connection (see text box). If you approach others in our professional arena with a synergistic spirit in mind, your connections will be more authentic, more enjoyable, and more likely to benefit the field.

DEFINITION OF NETWORKING

Merriam-Webster (2017, p. 1) defines *networking* as:

"the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions; specifically: the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business"

DEFINITION OF CONNECTION

Brené Brown (2010, p. 19) defines *connection* as:

"the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship"

TO MAKE CONNECTING EASIER (EVEN IF YOU HATE IT)

This section's strategies encourage connections without a "forced" feeling.

Connecting at Events

- ❑ **Visit discussion tables** or other arrangements made at some conferences to facilitate interaction. You can always sit quietly and listen, so the risk for a shy person need not be high. Though once you have gotten comfortable, your interest in the issue being discussed could prompt you to participate.
- ❑ **Set goals low enough to reach.** Curtin (2016) suggests aiming to make just one new connection at an event, as this takes the pressure off, provides a clear metric, and makes later follow up with contacts more manageable.
- ❑ **Get someone you know to attend with you.** A friendly security blanket can put you at ease, and a more-assertive friend can initiate conversations of which you can then be part even if you are shy.

- ❑ **Volunteer for a conference you're attending**, such as working the information booth or chairing a panel. This positions you for engagement with participants and presenters, even if you wouldn't normally initiate conversation on your own.

Connecting Anywhere (Online, by Phone, at Events, Etc.)

- ❑ **Give something.** Ask for someone's email address to send her a resource related to a shared area of interest. This could lead to further dialogue. My motivation when I give and help is simply that I like to give and help (for those who've read Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*: I'm one of those eager Mavens), but those who don't naturally volunteer resources to others can be convinced by research to do so. According to the *norm of reciprocity* founded on the research of Kunz and Woolcott (1976), people are motivated to do things for you when you do things for them (Smith, 2017; Tannenbaum, 2015).
- ❑ **Put out a call for participation or invite feedback.** This is how I met Margie Johnson, who has become a dear friend and remains one of my most frequent collaborators. She lives in Tennessee and I live in California. We met nonetheless (first over the phone) when I was conducting a study and asked EdSurge to post a call for participation in their e-newsletter. Margie called me because the study related to work she was doing. We connected well over the phone and were soon presenting together at conferences. Margie connected me with state-level educators who then applied my research, adding to my credibility (for those who've read Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*: Margie is a Connector). When I landed the chance to lecture at University of Cambridge, I arranged for Margie to co-teach the first class with me. When you find someone whose ideas and character you respect, it is natural to want to help her succeed. It does not feel forced and it is not insincere; it is simply enjoying a friend who shares your passion and enjoying the chance to help good ideas spread.

SCRAPPY TIP

Don't have the money or time to attend a particular conference? You can still take part in its twitter conversations. Search Twitter for the conference's designated hashtag (this is often the organization abbreviation and conference year, like "#ISTE2018") and follow along. You might find opportunities to contribute your own thoughts, too.

- ❑ **Join social media dialogue during events.** This is a great way to connect at the conference and also afterwards (through new social media followers and followed). Education conferences often announce a designated hashtag (such as “#NSPRA2018”) for the event, otherwise you can search likely hashtags and find the one most people are using. Add this hashtag to any tweets and other social media messages you post in relation to what you are learning or doing at the conference.

In a study on educators’ Twitter use, Alderton, Brunsell, and Bariexca (2011) found that educators’ use of Twitter for backchannel conversations during conferences supported networking; for example, one participant stated that while using Twitter at “professional conferences like ASCD and NCTE, I have met and collaborated with other educators from around the country to share ideas and best practices. These kinds of exchanges strengthened my experiences... socially and professionally” (p. 7).

TWITTER CHAT DEFINITION

A *Twitter chat* is a conversation between users of the social media tool Twitter, who are brought together by the use of a unique hashtag. These users include the same hashtag (example: #edchat) in their tweets and follow the stream of texts using this hashtag in order to view and participate in a single discussion. These discussions are often formally organized and recurring, such as at the same time and on the same day of every week.

- ❑ **Join social media dialogue anytime.** Posting comments and work that interests you, and reading the same from others, lets you connect with people across geographic boundaries. Chances are it won’t feel like networking; it’ll just feel like enjoying a shared passion with others, which is what this chapter is all about.

You can also participate through planned social media discussions. Every week there are hundreds of scheduled chats on Twitter related to education. If you visit <https://sites.google.com/site/twittereducationchats/education-chat-calendar> or Google *education twitter chats* you will find plenty to choose from. This allows you to converse from the comfort of your own home with people who share your field interests.

GOOD CONNECTING HABITS

The previous section gave you low-risk ways to put yourself out there, even if you hate networking. But once you are *in* the throes of connecting, there are some additional guidelines to encourage success:

- ❑ **Carry business cards with you.** If your employer does not provide them, order or make your own. If you're handy with your computer's printer, you can use perforated business card paper (available at office supply stores) to print your own.

MONEY-SAVING TIP

Sites like www.VistaPrint.com often run promotions where you can order professional-looking business cards for free.

If you hear a presenter or conference attendee mention something that correlates with your work, you can approach her afterwards, state what you appreciated hearing, and hand her your business card while adding you would love to talk more. Writing a note on the back of the card can help this person remember what you said.

If she gives you a business card, as well, note on the back of it what sparked the connection. Then send this person an email or call within the week initiating a conversation. If you give this person something, such as a link to a related article, this can help you feel less awkward about reaching out.

- ❑ **Write notes on the backs of business cards you receive.** Even if you think, "I'll never forget this person!" when she hands you a business card, figuring out later who's who in a stack of collected cards can be daunting.

Whenever I get a business card from someone, I write a note on the back related to our connection. For example, "working on a book like my fourth" or "has brother at BBC Radio who might want to interview me". These notes are a huge help when I follow up with people later.

- ❑ **Determine if an expert you admire will be making an appearance you can attend.** Just as I recommend you list your upcoming presentations and media appearances on your website, you'll find that other education experts often do the same. If you admire someone's work, look for her upcoming engagements. If you can attend one of these, reach out to the expert in the way described below.
- ❑ **Reach out to speakers prior to events.** When a conference's program is released in advance, you will likely spot session topics and speakers devoted to your area of expertise. These can be great folks with whom to connect, but speakers could be drowning in a crowd of other interested attendees if you wait to approach them at the conclusion of their talks.

Send a speaker a message by email or through social media well before an event if you want to connect there. Succinctly explain how your ideas might correlate and politely ask if the speaker would have some time for you over the course of the conference (for example, to grab a cup of coffee or sit at the same table during the conference lunch buffet). Posting some positive social media messages (such as tagging the speaker while expressing excitement about her last book or upcoming keynote) around the same time can help your invitation stand out.

I receive emails like this regularly (one just popped up in my inbox as I wrote the previous paragraph), and I have yet to turn anyone down. Like you, most speakers are seeking to have a positive impact on the world. Swapping ideas with other education experts is yet another way to do this.

SCRAPPY TIP

The first time I taught a course on this book's topic at the AERA Annual Meeting, I mentioned I was working on this book. After class, Norman Eng (2017) handed me a free copy of his book, *Teaching College: The Ultimate Guide to Lecturing, Presenting, and Engaging Students*, which relates to presenting one's education expertise. I read the book on the plane and promptly gave it a 5-star review on Amazon, recommended it to colleagues, and cited it several times in this book.

Handing a speaker a paper, article, or other resource you wrote (paired with a mention of why you believe she would find the work helpful) can increase the odds that she will read it, benefit from it, and share it with others.

If this speaker's words carry impact in the field, informing her with your work will benefit students impacted by those the speaker teaches.

- ❑ **Follow up.** Sheryl Sandberg (2013) of Facebook, Google, and *Lean In* fame tells of meeting a social media expert at a conference who shared impressive ideas and over time would reach out to Sandberg with some interesting information, but never asked to get together or infringe on Sandberg's time. When Sandberg later left the Starbucks board of directors, Sandberg suggested this woman as a replacement. This conference contact was then invited to join the Starbucks board of directors at only 29 years of age.

When you follow up with those you meet in helpful (not overbearing) ways, this can lead to collaboration in ways that benefit students. It can also open you up to new opportunities to share your expertise.

- ❑ **Facilitate sharing.** If your sharing potential outgrows the way you and contacts correspond (such as emailing back and forth), graduate to another mode for sharing, such as using a free Gmail account to use Google Docs (www.google.com/docs), where multiple people can collaborate on the same items. Steve Waters of the Teach Well Alliance created a collaboration site on Basecamp (www.basecamp.com) for people to discuss and share resources on teacher wellness. Every day that site propels international efforts to support teachers.

GOOD CONNECTING MINDSET

Approach connection-making with the right state of mind. For example:

- ❑ **Be in it for students.** One of the reasons people cringe at the thought of networking is that we've seen so many superficial, what-can-you-do-for-me networkers. Ugh. I definitely don't want you to be that, and I don't think there's any benefit – to you or students – to being primarily focused on your own advancement.

When your core motivation is helping children, and you're making connections in order to help more children, this intention shines through. In these cases, you are connecting with others over ideas and altruistic plans. You are just as excited to offer a way to help someone else share an idea that can help kids (you say things like, "Let me introduce you to a blogger I know who writes about that same topic!") as you are to advance your own

ideas. Some people are still suspicious of the well-intentioned, but most people will recognize your goodwill as they get to know you.

- **Conscientiously strive for diversity.** Steve Jobs once said, “If you're gonna make connections which are innovative ... you have to not have the same bag of experiences as everyone else does” (Baer, 2015). Being around people who are different from us provokes thought, makes us more industrious, exposes us to added information and perspectives, and even makes us more creative (Phillips, 2014). Even if your intention when connecting with others is to share rather than to receive, you and your work will benefit substantially if you open yourself to learning from a wide range of fellow experts.

Don't miss that I wrote *if you open yourself to learning from*. It's key that no member of a group is added as a mere token. Rather, every member will have a unique viewpoint and knowledgebase from which you can and should learn. As Leslie Odom, Jr. (2018) wrote, “If you have a person from an underrepresented group on your team and you aren't tapping them for their unique and varied perspectives and contributions, it may be tokenism. And if it's tokenism, it's always a missed opportunity” (p. 93).

When I attended an education authors' cocktail reception, I noticed all the Black authors in the room were sitting at the same table. So, I (a blonde White lady ... OK, fine: *artificially* blonde) joined them. One woman there told me how her early experiences – different from mine and from everyone's at the table – shaped her current work in both urban and rural schools. Her journey was a formidable one, and hearing it gave me insight into why she applied particular strategies for optimum success with students. I walked away with a deeper understanding of our shared field of work than I would have if I had only conversed with someone with a similar life story to mine. In another conversation, one of the table's gentlemen happened to share insights about raising a daughter of another race. We compared and contrasted this with my White mother's experiences being raised by a Black woman in the American South back in the 1940s and 50s. You can't gain a lifetime of understanding from what you hear second-hand (let alone during the span of a dinner conversation), but each person's experience is only their own anyway; the goal is to learn from as many different people as we can to get as mindful as we can about the wide array of circumstances in our world.

Yet as much as we talk about diversity in this field, we are still subconsciously drawn to people who look just like us: the hip youngsters in the room gather at one table, the alternatively-dressed folks are at another, etc. This tendency limits us and requires conscious effort to avoid.

If you're not a member of the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS), you could still benefit from hearing about their

latest endeavors, and you'll most likely hear about these by sitting next to a Latinx educator. Aiming for interaction with people of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, genders, creeds, ages, and sexual orientations exposes us to a wider range of perspectives and – with that – ideas and opportunities that can help us better serve our field.

- ❑ **Be approachable.** If someone initiates discussion with you online, do you give a curt answer? As you await the start of a conference session or enjoy the lunchtime buffet, are you hunched over your cellphone or salad? I hope not.

Whether you interact with someone in person or not, give thoughtful responses and ask questions that invite discussion. When you attend events, sit up, display open body language, and smile to people who pass by or join you. These habits communicate you're open to talking, which is required if you're going to swap ideas that can better kids' lives.

- ❑ **Be positive.** In our field, people connect in hopes of finding, sharing, and expanding upon solutions. If you're discussing a topic like school lunches and all you do is rant about the meals' shortcomings, you aren't offering anything to your discussion partner.

As a vegan who is bewildered by the junk food on my daughter's school lunch menu, I can accept that many school lunches have shortcomings. I also know, however, there are many people trying to make improvements. Even if I don't have a solution to improving school lunches when I discuss this topic, I can propose possible ideas and questions worth investigating, or I can name other people concerned with the topic and suggest we get together to brainstorm solutions. I can be focused on solutions.

The same goes for other educators connecting over other topics. Discussing problems and frustrations is important, but pair these discussions with words that move dialogue forward toward improvements.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF MENTOR

This section is not about the mentor who helps you get better at your job, like a teacher who helps you perfect your teaching, or a researcher who helps you perfect your research. Rather, this section is about the mentor who helps you share your expertise with the world, such as through helping you land opportunities to reach a wider audience. Having the latter type of mentor is a huge asset for an education expert seeking to share knowledge.

You don't have to have a single mentor in this endeavor. Maybe there is someone who can help you navigate the book publishing world, someone who will teach you to use technology and social media, and someone who will help you book speaking gigs. All these areas, and more, are part of maximizing your

work's reach, but you might not meet a single person with vast expertise in all these areas. There could be numerous people who, together, provide you with comprehensive support in sharing your education expertise.

Finding a Mentor

Don't ask a stranger to be your mentor (Sandberg, 2013). Rather, let mentorship begin organically (someone starts helping you in small ways, and the relationship develops), though it is fine to label the relationship eventually if you'd like. Sometimes this prompts the mentor to provide you with increased assistance.

To identify your mentor(s), consider:

- Who has the career, influence, or visibility you desire?
- Who might not be ahead of you, but is scrappily finding and landing great opportunities for herself?
- Who seems genuinely interested in your success?
- Who seems willing to help you?
- Are you looking at all of your options?

People are often drawn to those who remind them of themselves, but that tendency leads to limitations (covered in the previous section). I'm a White woman, whereas my current mentor is Black. My mentees are all either Asian, Black, Hispanic, gay, male, or half my age, and would never consider me their twin in appearance or life experience. We would all miss out on the value of mentorship if we only forged connections with those who look or live like us.

LOOK BENEATH THE SURFACE

You don't have to have mentors who look like you. Had I been waiting for a black, female Soviet specialist mentor, I would still be waiting. – Condoleezza Rice, first Black female Secretary of State (Jackson & League, 2015, p. 4).

Keeping a Mentor

Being a desirable mentee will help you:

- Acquire a mentor.
- Keep a mentor.
- Inspire your mentor to help you as much as she is able.

I have a fabulous mentee named Colette Boston. If I offer to bring a printout of something to our meeting, she offers to bring it, instead. If I suggest something online, she says she'll find it on her own. When she asked me to be her mentor, she wrote, "I am very low-key (don't need a lot of attention)." I could not refuse someone who appreciates my time and clearly has the self-sufficient, go-getter qualities that tell me this woman will go far (as she quickly has), and thus any time spent helping her would mean a great contribution to the education field.

Be like Colette Boston. Mentors are typically busy people who don't have time for excessive hand-holding (Sandberg, 2013). If someone is generous enough to step up to mentor you (which can be as casual as sending opportunities your way), show appreciation and respect this person's time. This means:

- ❑ When getting to know the mentor, share your pitch (covered earlier) on your expertise and a sentence that captures your background. Do not share a rambling account of all your life experiences.
- ❑ Be flexible. If your mentor wants to talk in 10-minute blocks when she drives to work, don't insist on long dinner meetings.
- ❑ Be as self-sufficient as possible. For example, if your mentor suggests you should attend a certain conference, don't expect the mentor to email you the website link, submission details, etc. Instead, find the details online yourself.
- ❑ Do not lean on your mentor for emotional support, such as asking to meet for pep talks. You can speak with friends or a counselor for that.
- ❑ Do not ask your mentor to introduce someone you know to someone the mentor knows (for example, an editor). Making a professional introduction is often perceived as an endorsement of that person, which is hard to do for someone your mentor doesn't know. If the introduction results in conflict (for example, your friend fails to meet the editor's deadlines), it could reflect badly on your mentor.

You might have a mentor friend who is fine if you violate the above guidelines, but at least consider the possibility that she is not. Otherwise, your mentor could view you as unappreciative, too time-intensive, or as someone who lacks the motivation to make the most of mentorship. Your mentor could be less likely to offer you guidance in the future, because such interaction would mean a strain on the mentor's time.

Mentorship Ideas

Consider the following activities with your mentor:

- ❑ Go through your mentor's CV together and ask her to highlight any opportunities you should also pursue (for example, a publication for which you

should also submit your work) and identify any introductions your mentor might make (such as to a broadcast journalist who might want to also interview you).

- ❑ Meet up with your mentor at conferences and attend sessions together. This will make it easier for your mentor to introduce you to people she knows.
- ❑ Ask your mentor to forward prospects to you. Express special interests (for example, you've done plenty of writing but are looking for more speaking engagements).
- ❑ If your research areas match, your mentor might be able to bring you in as a co-presenter or co-writer for an opportunity she lands.

Finally, pay the help back when you can. I have had mentors throughout my life, and I found the most exciting stage of mentorship to be when I, as the mentee, came into a position to help my mentors. It can be easy to miss these opportunities, as we are used to seeing ourselves as the less-expert half of the partnership, so look carefully. Is there an opportunity you learned about that your mentor would also like to pursue? Is there a new journal paper on your mentor's research topic? Have you met someone who can help your mentor if introduced? There is a wonderful feeling of having met a milestone when you pay some help back to your mentor.

CLOSE TO HOME (UNIONS, SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS, AND MORE)

This book covers some far-reaching types of opportunities, both geographically and in terms of wow factor. However, it is also worth considering what you can do *within* your workplace and circles to share your expertise. While such possibilities are endless, a few include:

- ❑ Step up for a leadership role (department chair, committee head, union representative, professional association leader, etc.).
- ❑ Form or join a special interest group (SIG) (for example, a Lean In circle, <http://leanincircles.org>).
- ❑ Collaborate with coworkers on a new study.
- ❑ Arrange to conduct training sessions for your colleagues.

Brainstorm on what other options are possible within your specific organization and pursue those that interest you. If such opportunities are difficult to secure (such as if you are new to the field and are being overlooked due to lacking experience), you can improve your professional image and thus your chances of being taken seriously by pursuing prospects elsewhere in this book. Many of those opportunities (writing, speaking, and more) take place online, making them “close to home” as well.

It's common to aim for roles within groups that currently reflect your same ideology. However, you can also select groups you wish were on a different trajectory. For example, "unions . . . need to evolve with the times. There are incredible, solution-oriented state and local union leaders leading the way on this . . . and there are others who are struggling to move into the twenty-first century" (Coggins, 2017, pp 31–32). If your union leaders fit the latter description, you have the potential to get involved in the union to spearhead efforts to protect good teachers while simultaneously doing what's best for kids and what's realistic in light of budget constraints and other realities. Maybe there's a group within your university, lab, neighborhood, office, or school that could similarly host you as a source of positive change.

LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS (JOINING AND SUBSCRIBING OPPORTUNITIES)

LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS

This book lists 220 organizations for you in an electronic file that makes it easy to find and pursue organizations to join or to subscribe to its publications. You can sort the file by type or visit each website with a simple click. The list contains details and manipulation-friendly fields you can use to track your subscriptions and memberships. See the "eResources" section near the start of this book for details on accessing and using this "List of Organizations".

ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations offer pathways to meet and interact with professionals who share your specific interests. View this book's "List of Organizations" eResources (described above) for a list of organizations within the education field, as well as their websites, to consider joining and setting up a member profile page. A "Guide to Hunting and Harvesting" eResource (introduced in this book's last chapter) covers many benefits you can get from organizations.

Blaze Your Own Trail

If you find a necessary organization to be nonexistent, consider founding it yourself. When Chris Moggia was a school district administrator, he noticed how increasingly complex data analysis and state reporting was becoming in California, whereas staff who work extensively with student data did not have adequate

support in this endeavor. Chris thus founded the nonprofit California Association of School Data, Assessment, and Accountability Professionals (CASDAAP) to support district data staff. Projections based on similar projects suggest CASDAAP will have 330 members within its first year. Chris left his district position and now runs CASDAAP fulltime, making a difference for students statewide.

Another option is to start a new Special Interest Group (SIG) within an organization that offers them if you find your specific passion isn't addressed by an existing SIG. Starting a new SIG is typically a petition process in which you must establish that 75-or-so current members of the organization want the SIG to exist. Search the organization's website or speak with its representatives for application specifics.

CALLS FOR INPUT

Government bodies, companies, research institutions, organizations, and more put out a "call for input" when they want experts or other stakeholders to contribute feedback. This often relates to a problem they seek to solve or an endeavor they seek to implement.

Calls for input are chances for you to contribute to decisions and affect policies in quick, convenient ways. Some calls allow you to include your contact information and can lead to more extensive, follow-up involvement in an endeavor.

Keep an eye out for calls for input from your professional affiliations. Various factions of the U.S. White House, U.K. Parliament, U.S. Department of Education, and U.K. Department for Education often announce calls for input, as do educational research organizations like the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and British Educational Research Association (BERA). On such entities' websites, search for "call for input" (using the search field and placing the phrase in quotes) to produce a list of upcoming calls. Searching "call for knowledge" and "call for findings" is also worthwhile.

The "List of Serving Opportunities" eResource, covered in the next chapter, contains specific calls for input with the details needed to pursue them. Some calls are one-time occurrences, but those issuing the calls often issue different calls in the future. Note some government administrations issue requests for feedback more frequently than others, so if you don't see many calls during one leader's term, it's worth checking again after the torch has been passed.

News publications also issue calls for input to collect quotes and leads for stories. You can search your favorite news sites for terms like "to Hear from You" (usually preceded by "We'd like", "We want", "[this publication] would like" etc. For example, *The New York Times* (2017) issued this call with a short form for educators to complete: "If you are an educator who works with undocumented students, we'd like to hear from you. We may follow up with you to hear more about your story. Your name and comments might be published" (p. 1). Also keep an eye on a publication's social media, where such invitations are commonly released.

POLICYMAKING

If you are intimidated by the prospect of addressing politicians and other policymakers, note that Elmo (a Muppet from Sesame Street) testified before U.S. Congress on behalf of education, resulting in \$225,000 in federal funding allotted to research on music and the brain (Ward & Suk, 2018). All education field roles (meaning you) offer a unique perspective to inform decisions that impact kids and those who serve them.

Teacher voice, in particular, is underrepresented in – yet of critical importance to – policy decisions (Gozali, Claassen Thrush, Soto-Peña, Whang, & Luschei, 2017). As Teach Plus founder and Entrepreneur in Residence at Harvard University Celine Coggins notes, “When education decisions are made without teachers at the table, students suffer the consequences” (Coggins, 2017, p. 6). Whatever your role, I encourage you to consider how you might lend your voice to policymaking.

Where Decisions Are Made

In most countries, regional government entities make at least some education policy decisions (and national decisions affect different regions within the country differently); in countries with federal education systems, regional authorities are the primary decision-makers and managers of education programs (OECD, 2014, p. 34). For example, only 6% of U.S. federal spending (as opposed to 49% of state spending) goes to education, and “very little decision making happens in Washington DC . . . most of the power to set direction in education resides at the state and local levels” (Coggins, 2017, p. xvi).

Getting face time with politicians is easier than many people guess. Just picking up the phone can land you an appointment with a state assemblyperson in the U.S. (it did for me here in California), member of the Lords in the U.K., etc. I found it very easy to have one-on-one conversations with state assemblypersons, state and federal departments of education representatives, city councilpersons, school board members, ambassadors, and other people in government positions. Likewise, getting discussion time with members of organizations devoted to my areas of expertise (even founders and CEOs) was remarkably simple. These people generally want to know new findings related to their missions, so remember you have something to offer them.

Also, consider more than just your own country. For example, if your expertise on the “school choice” debate matured too late to inform Britain’s 1988 Education Reform Act, timing could have still placed you at the forefront of the U.S.’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (or in the voucher drama U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has stirred). Those acts bore similar implications for poor performing schools (such as losing students to higher performing

schools), even though they were enacted in different countries. Students in other parts of the world are just as worthy of your voice, and the internet makes it easy to stay abreast of education developments all over the planet.

Opportunities to Impact Policy

There are many ways to impact policy. First, consider current public dialogue and debate on your area of expertise and determine where you fit in and what you have to offer. If such public discourse is missing entirely, consider what aspects of your topic are most important to bring to policymakers' and the general public's attention first.

Next, consider the following approaches to inform those whose votes or decisions shape educational reform:

- ❑ The previous “Calls for Input” section covers one way political bodies collect feedback to inform policy.
- ❑ Reach U.S. Congress members through www.house.gov/representatives/find or www.govtrack.us. Reach U.K. Members of Parliament, Lords, and officers at www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices. Reach members of U.K. Parliament's Education Committee at www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/membership. Call offices and make appointments to meet about specific issues and current policies.

Congressional staff (mainly in the majority party's interests) determines who gives in-person testimonies before U.S. Congress by speaking with insider networks, advocacy organizations, and other experts for names of likely witnesses (Badgett, 2016). By that point, members generally have their minds made up on an issue and simply seek to prove their points. Thus, there is much value in speaking with politicians early and informally to influence their stances before legislation is being enacted.
- ❑ Unlike congressional hearings, state and city level hearings are often open to the public. Call ahead of time to determine what the signup process is, then show up and share your professional opinion on a related topic.
- ❑ The “Internships” section of the next chapter covers another way in which you can work closely with policymakers (such as at The White House or House of Commons).
- ❑ Email Britain's Secretary of State for the Department for Education (DfE) at ministers@education.gov.uk and the U.S. Secretary of Education at press@ed.gov.

RESOURCE TIP

For Primary and Secondary School Educators:

- *How to Be Heard: 10 Lessons Teachers Need to Advocate for Their Students and Profession* by Celine Coggins (2017)
- Teach Plus (www.teachplus.org), Teach to Lead (www.teachtolead.org), and ASCD Educator Advocates program (www.ascd.org/educatoradvocates) empower school teachers to be more involved in policy.

For Professors and Researchers:

- *The Public Professor: How to Use Your Research to Change the World* by M. V. Lee Badgett (2016)
- The American Educational Research Association (AERA) offers webinars on how to effectively communicate education research to congressional district offices. Search AERA's Virtual Research Learning Center (<https://eo3.commpartners.com/users/aera>) for titles like "Speaking Up for Education Research" and "Insights on Sharing Education Research with Capitol Hill", and watch AERA newsletters for announcements of upcoming webinars.

For All Education Experts:

- *Policy Making in Britain* by Peter Dorey (2014)
- ASCD offers *Policy Priorities* (www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/policy-priorities/archived-issues.aspx). The quarterly publication provides insight into current education policy topics, and its "Dig Deeper" links lead to additional resources to supplement your research on each topic.

- ❑ Watch state or regional entities' websites (like www.doe.k12.de.us) for invitations to provide feedback on new initiatives. For example, in 2016 when all U.S. states were charged with forming their own implementation plans to reflect the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state Departments of Education collected community input before drafting their plans. It can also help to determine who is on state or regional advisory teams, then reach out to members to offer your expertise. Also build relationships with regional and state department of education officials within a division that matches your area of expertise (student data, gifted education, etc.).
- ❑ Think tanks, federal research programs, and other players in the research arena are go-to sources of input for government policymakers. *The Guardian* maintains a list of U.K. think tanks at www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/30/list-thinktanks-uk. For the U.S., Comprehensive Centers are listed at www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/gen/othersites/compcenters.html (this list can change, particularly after a 5-year period), and Regional Educational Laboratories are listed at <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>. Google searches and use of this book's "List of Organizations" eResources will direct you to more.

You can email a program in your area to learn how you might get involved (organizations are regularly looking to forge partnerships) or look for calls for participation in their publications and at national conferences. For example, a research group will sometimes offer a session at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) STATS-DC Data Conference focused on how education experts can get involved in writing standards, collecting educator input, etc.

- ❑ Some events are devoted entirely to education policymaking and advocacy. For example, ASCD hosts an annual conference called the Leadership Institute for Legislative Advocacy (LILA) (details are listed in this book's "List of Conferences" eResource).
- ❑ Join an organization that helps mobilize, empower, and position education experts to influence education reform in positive ways. Bad Ass Teacher (www.badassteacher.org) and the Network for Public Education (www.networkforpubliceducation.org) are examples. See the text box for more.
- ❑ Some programs are devoted (partly or entirely) to enhancing education experts' influence on policy. Some can be found listed as "Fellowships/Programs" in this book's "List of Serving Opportunities" eResource (introduced in the next chapter). For example, the ASCD Educator Advocates program (www.ascd.org/educatoradvocates) will put you in touch with what is happening in Congress, state boards of education, and more. ASCD

“Educator advocates have access to invitation-only briefings and Q&A sessions with policy experts[,] ... webinars with ASCD’s Government Relations team[,] and customizable policy and advocacy resources” (ASCD, 2017, p. 7). See the text box for more.

- ❑ When you are aware of a new policy in the works or a policy revision, write an op-ed with research-backed and expert-voiced suggestions. “Chapter 4. Writing Short-Form” contained a “Newspaper” section and introduced this book’s “List of Writing Opportunities” eResource, containing a wealth of places to submit commentaries.
- ❑ Visit education governing bodies’ regional websites for opportunities to contribute. For example, the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (2017) posted, “We are looking for educators ... who demonstrate outstanding instructional and leadership abilities ... These distinguished educators are considered for special recognition programs. Additionally, these educators are considered for statewide and national advisory boards and task forces” (p. 2). This led to a Talent Pool Recommendation Form which educators could submit to join this pool for opportunities.
- ❑ University news and public relations offices often maintain a list of faculty experts to share with media and policymakers. If you work at a university, get on such a list.
- ❑ Write a letter to top officials. When President Bill Clinton won his presidential election, Teresa Ghilarducci wrote him a congratulatory note that offered her help and some ideas on reform; the letter was passed around among Clinton’s insiders and led to Ghilarducci’s invitation to be on important boards (Badgett, 2016). You can use the same verbiage in letters you send elsewhere, so it costs you negligible added time to reach high with your correspondence. Go for it!

SCRAPPY TIP

Twitter is the social media platform favored by policy-makers (Badgett, 2016). Join dialogue with influencers there.

- ❑ Run. Justin Trudeau was a math and French teacher before becoming Canada’s Prime Minister. Emma Hardy was a primary schoolteacher before becoming a Member of Parliament in Britain. Mark Takano was an

English teacher before becoming a U.S. Congressman. If you believe you can help more kids through a political appointment, consider stepping into the arena. Resources like Run for Office in the U.S. (www.runforoffice.org) and The Electoral Commission in the U.K. (www.electoralcommission.org.uk) offer support.

Approach

When speaking with policymakers, avoid long-winded or negative rants. Policymakers are busy people looking for solutions. Your ideas should be presented and backed up succinctly, just as you learned to do with your pitch and talking points in “Chapter 1. Introduction”.

Be open to listening and to entertaining compromises, as policymakers face constraints that determine what can and cannot be done. When speaking with legislators, educators should plan to help them balance budgets, spend tax dollars in a way voters would find wise, identify prospective funds (such as grants), and ensure an equitable distribution of resources across the system; consider that 49% of U.S. state budget dollars are already spent on education (health care gets 25%, public safety gets 11%, and 15% goes to other causes) (Coggins, 2017). Decision-makers won’t listen to you because they want to help you; rather, they will listen to you because they want *you* to help *them*, and they’ll continue to listen if you provide that help in a timely, accommodating way.

BRIEFING PAPERS AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES

A briefing paper (for which you write a brief summary, outline facts, and suggest action) can help whomever you speak with to understand your points and respond as you recommend.

If you provide policymakers with a research report, some might request an executive summary. An executive summary states the problem the report addresses, your purpose in writing the report, and your findings, conclusions, and recommendations. It is like a report abstract (covered in “Chapter 7. Writing Short-Form”) except it is meant for non-academic audiences. Also, unlike an abstract, an executive summary is typically a full page and sometimes spans up to ten pages if the report it summarizes is long.

Timing

Policymaking experts suggest waiting for a “policy window” to open, which means a time when your area of expertise becomes a hot topic in the media. “As the window opens, new ideas and voices will find it easier to get into the mix” (Badgett, 2016, p. 41). This is great advice and worth following; this is often how someone goes from quietly working at her school to suddenly testifying before congress and being quoted in major papers as the “go to” expert.

However, don’t sit back and *only* wait for a policy window. By the time politicians are debating a topic for the cameras, they have typically already consulted experts and have already made up their minds on an issue (and politicians get raked over the coals for changing their minds, so by then they are reticent to change their public stances). While you’re on the lookout for a window to open, speak with policymakers, establish yourself as an expert, widen your network of folks who know you know your topic. That way you can make some progress while you await the opening of a policy window, and you’ll be ready to stick your head through that window when it opens.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Part of using your connecting powers for good is championing others who have important insight to share in the field. As you connect with others, find ways to introduce colleagues to like minds, point colleagues in the direction of new opportunities, and share tips and venues you’ve found to be effective in spreading your own work. These endeavors will allow you to bring even more benefit to students.

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