Leading Beyond the Classroom:
Three Cases of Teacher Advocacy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While teachers advocate for the needs of children daily, research has shown that teachers do not often engage in advocacy beyond their classroom. This chapter presents the cases of three teacher leaders who advocate within multiple systems; each participant works in a different geographical and political system and within different communities within those systems. Using bioecological systems theory to analyze the advocacy journeys of these teacher leaders, this chapter focuses on the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that supported these teacher leaders' advocacy work in multiple systems. Along with a disposition that advocacy is integral to teaching, three key themes emerged that allowed participants to successfully engage in advocacy within multiple systems: strong advocacy role models, feelings of confidence and success, and social justice motivations.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are on the frontline of education; they are required to navigate district, state, and federal mandates while meeting the diverse needs of students. They respond to increasing demands, often with little monetary or public support (Baines et al., 2020). Recently, state legislators across the United States have proposed and passed bills that: ban books, social-emotional learning, and culturally responsive practices; require more of schools without adequate funding; encourage parents to report teachers; and impose consequences of fines and even firing.

According to the American Library Association (VanDenburgh, 2022), book bans doubled from 2020 to 2021. In a 9-month study conducted by an independent consultant, 1,145 titles were banned in 86 districts in 26 states between July 1, 2021, and March 31, 2022 (Friedman & Farid Johnson, 2022). Within these districts are 2,899 schools representing over 2 million students. Most of the banned books related to sexual orientation, sexual identity, race, racism, history, and social justice (Friedman & Farid Johnson, 2022; Haupt, 2022) with LGBTQ books making up one-third of the controversial texts (VanDenburgh, 2022). Shockingly, bans on books included 209 picture books, 123 middle grade books, 150-chapter books, and 537 books written for young adults (Friedman & Farid Johnson, 2022).

Although critical race theory (CRT) is typically confined to graduate school, some parents and lawmakers claimed it is being taught in pre-K-12 classrooms across the U.S., often applying the label of CRT to any learning experiences that relate to race, religion, or social justice issues. As of February 1, 2022, "at least 36 states have adopted or introduced laws or policies that restrict teaching about race and racism" (Stout & Wilburn, 2022, para. 3), and at least 19 of those states have passed laws or rules that put restrictions on classroom conversations about race and racism (Waxman, 2022). Strikingly, for each violation, schools risk "2% of their state funds or 1 million dollars, whichever is less" (Waxman, 2022, para. 4). These restrictions, which have been included in approximately seventy bills across multiple states, often extend beyond pre-K-12 classrooms and include colleges and universities.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has also been a target of state legislation. Ceron (2022) reported nine states have challenged SEL including Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin. Ceron explained these challenges may be because some individuals believe and claim SEL is used to secretly teach banned topics. For example, Oklahoma State Senator Shane Jett proposed a bill against social-emotional learning in schools. Jett said, "What we don't trust is the weaponized curriculum from suspect foundations draining our teachers' precious classroom hours to surveil our families, while applying psychological programming on our children without parental consent" (Oklahoma Senate, 2022, para. 6). Likewise, Florida rejected 54 math textbooks with claims that the books teach topics such as CRT and SEL (Archie, 2022; Gross, 2022). Importantly, the rejection of these textbooks has far-reaching implications. As some of the most populated states, California, Florida, and Texas have a lot of influence over textbook publishers due to the volume of books they purchase (Gross, 2022). Thus, they have sway over what is contained in textbooks used in schools across the nation.

When such legislation is proposed, who better than teachers to advocate for the needs of students? Teachers understand what happens in classrooms, why such legislation may be inappropriate or potentially harmful, and their expertise is needed to effectively advocate for high quality learning experiences for students. Qualified and prepared teachers have education and expertise on child development, child guidance, and appropriate curriculum and are aware of the pertinent issues and how to address those issues. For these reasons, teachers' voices must be heard in the cacophonous chambers of state capitols as well as in school board meetings, community meetings, parent teacher associations, and throughout their school community.

Research (ASCA, 2019) has indicated that teachers can influence students, other teachers, school culture, academic outcomes, and policy when they develop leadership skills. Teacher leaders maintain teaching responsibilities while "taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 140). Teacher leaders are servant leaders who place a primary emphasis on the well-being of people and their communities. Specifically, teacher leaders often advocate on behalf of their students, seeking services, policies, and materials that will primarily benefit their students. Advo-

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