Mentoring Advocates in Our Field

by Eric Karolak

Say the word ‘mentoring’ in an early childhood conversation, and most people think of mentoring a classroom teacher or mentoring another practitioner early in their career in early childhood education. And most of you probably didn’t expect mentoring to be the focus of a Policy Matters column. But just as mentoring of classroom teachers and program directors is important, mentoring also has a place in the realm of public policy. Why do you mentor classroom teachers, after all? To retain them and to help them be more effective with children. And you need that if you’re going to achieve the goal of providing high-quality early childhood services. Mentoring in the public policy context is important for achieving that goal, too. Helping people be more effective advocates — helping their advocacy message be heard more clearly — is a sure-fire way to win the policy and funding decisions that will give every child access to high-quality early childhood education.

Mentoring in Advocacy

Mentoring in advocacy can take many shapes and encompasses a variety of relationships, largely because advocacy covers such a broad range of activities. In general, there are three kinds of mentoring relationships:

- Mentoring a newcomer
- Peer-to-peer mentoring
- Mentoring an interested party

While the first two relationships are similar to mentoring in the classroom, mentoring an interested party is unique to advocacy.

Why Mentor for Advocacy?

Each of us has the capacity to be an advocate. As regular readers of this column should know, we all have an interest in making our voices heard as supporters of early childhood education and as program implementers who have unique knowledge about how best to design and deliver services for young children and their families.

A central premise of Policy Matters is that, well, policy does matter. Decisions made in Washington, DC or in your state capitol can directly affect your program. Minimum requirements set by state licensing set a floor on which most programs build. Detailed federal program requirements create a regimen by which Head Start programs operate. State quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) are further shaping the marketplace in which all programs do business. And funding decisions for child care, Head Start, and publicly-funded pre-K affect the ability of many families to access your program. Whether it’s a major change like the introduction of the Designation Renewal System or ‘competition’ in Head Start, or a seemingly mundane change like a clarification about state licensing rules, public policy matters to us all.

Just as mentoring in the classroom makes perfect sense in terms of staff retention and quality improvement, mentoring advocates is a smart strategy to create the public policy environment in which your program can flourish and the greatest number of young children can blossom and enrich our world with all of their gifts.

Mentoring a Newcomer

As much as public policy matters, it can seem pretty alien. Elected officials are celebrities, to a degree, and increasingly many are in a different socioeconomic stratum from most in our field and in our
nation. Many practitioners aren’t familiar with the process by which state administrative rules are made nor do they know whom to approach about a problem with or omission in the law. So, the idea that you — a toddler teacher or a center director — are supposed to go and talk to Senator Soandso can be intimidating, confusing, and off-putting. Addressing this — the sense of inadequacy many citizens feel about contacting their elected officials — is the first responsibility of the newcomer’s mentor. These initial efforts revolve around helping newcomers to see that they have something to say and convincing them they have the ability to say it well. To that end, a mentor can:

- show newcomers how they already have been advocates in what they do, even on a small scale.
- demonstrate that practitioners have special knowledge that can help policymakers make better decisions: how young children learn through play, what is developmentally appro-
- priate, or why full-day, full-year programs are important for parents.
- remind newcomers that elected officials are people, too, many of them from quite modest backgrounds, and every last one of them puts their pants on just like the rest of us.
- provide or help obtain talking points or support materials, often by connecting the newcomer to an advocacy group.
- let them know that they are not alone, not only in their apprehension, but in being a part of a larger movement of early learning advocates.
- explain how meetings are often held with legislative staff who can be more approachable than elected officials, usually are eager to hear from constituents and to understand an issue, and are the elected’s ‘eyes and ears.’
- share your own stories about the first time you made ‘an ask’ of an official.
I’ve worked with many practitioners advocating for their first time, often when lots of others have come to the state capitol for a ‘lobby day’ or to Washington, DC for a ‘fly-in’ to advocate on the same issue. You can literally see the sense of accomplishment that comes after the first or maybe second visit in the way these newcomers smile and carry themselves the rest of the day. Advocacy can be a great way to uplift your staff and re-energize them about the importance of what they do every day.

**Peer Mentoring**

For those of you who have crossed the advocacy threshold, mentoring can still be valuable. However, a one-on-one relationship with a senior mentor can be harder to maintain or not recognized as valuable because, after all, you’re already in the fold and how much time does a mentor have? Many have had the experience of Bob Siegel, a long-time child care advocate, administrator, trainer, and former national director of Easter Seals’ child development network. Reflecting on advocacy in Illinois, he explained, “Circumstances threw a group of us together, and we relied on each other to develop our skills.” That’s peer mentoring.

In this middle period of your life as an advocate, peer mentoring can help you have fun and also be more effective as a messenger. Siegel recalled how he and a peer honed their own skills while training others. He said, “Role-playing got us more comfortable with advocacy. Advocacy is not intuitive, and it has to be demystified.” He describes doing “a road show at meetings and conferences,” role-playing the advocate and the decision-maker. “It was great for newcomers and helped us, too.”

Connect with peer advocates through a professional association, at a conference or, better, an advocacy event. Find a partner to co-write an ‘LTE’ — advocacy jargon for ‘letter to the editor’ — of your local paper or news website. Work together in your local or state organization — the more the merrier — and in advocacy, that means a bigger base and better chance to get noticed.

**“Verrry Interesting”**

In advocacy, there are always interested parties, stakeholders, and decision-makers. They’re audiences for your advocacy — individuals who might have an interest, large or small, or a key role to play in an issue. Many also are people who you should consider mentoring. In some cases, you’re broadening our base. After all, on some level, our goal is to make everyone an ECE advocate. Local business leader? That’s someone who needs you to nourish in them an appreciation for how you develop the workforce of tomorrow today. Law enforcement official? Nurse? Yep, potential stakeholders for your mentoring.

Public policy change is easier when advocates come from a wide range of backgrounds to create broad-based support for the long term. Some of the most important mentoring can be with staff who work for elected officials. “This work is very personal,” says policy consultant Mary Beth Salomone Testa. “Everybody says, ‘It’s about relationships.’ You need to throw yourself in. Be a useful resource. Be a reliable contact. Keep showing up in their world. Lots of people talk to electeds and their staff; some float in and out. After nearly 15 years as an advocate, I can tell you they remember the ones who show up, stay in touch, and are reliable — people they can count on for accurate information and unbiased understanding.”

Salomone Testa, who learned the value of ECE as the daughter of an early childhood educator before setting up MBST Solutions, adds with encouragement, “Just like your program’s children and parents count on you every day to be reliable. Be that for your state or federal official.”

So, now when you hear ‘mentor’ you know the context can be about advocacy, too, not just about program. In both cases, mentoring strengthens our field, revitalizes our people, and supports the expansion of high-quality child care and early learning experiences for all children.