


Advocacy

 Supporting, championing, and protecting the interests of marginalized individuals, groups, and communities

Advocacy Defined

The principle of *advocacy* in organizing, engagement, and equity work refers to actions that are taken by individuals or groups with power, authority, influence, funding, or expertise to advance, champion, or protect the interests of particular individuals or groups. Advocacy is typically performed on behalf of, or in partnership with, those who may not have the power, expertise, or other resources required to advance their own interests in a given situation. Yet advocacy may also be conducted by individuals or groups that acquire knowledge, skills, or power so they can more effectively advocate for their own interests.

Advocacy is a distinct principle of organizing, engagement, and equity work because advocates typically *utilize power to help those with less power*. If those who have influence, expertise, funding, or decision-making authority in a school system or community don't use their power on behalf of those with less power, it can make the process of building power (organizing), sharing power (engagement), and equalizing power (equity) more difficult.

Discussion: Competing Definitions of Advocacy

Advocacy may take a wide variety of forms in organizing, engagement, and equity work, and people often define the term differently from place to place—there is no universally accepted definition of the concept, which can produce a lot of debate about what advocacy is or isn't and what advocates should or shouldn't do.

For example, one common distinction is between advocacy that is done *for* individuals and groups, such as a social worker who helps a family secure housing or public services (sometimes called a “service-oriented” approach), and advocacy that is done *with* individuals and groups, such as a national organization that helps parents in a community organize a campaign to change a district policy that adversely affects their children (which is sometimes considered a “capacity-building” approach).

In some organizations, the term advocacy may only be applied to actions that are done *for other individuals and groups*, while other organizations may apply the term to individuals who are advocating *for their own interests* or groups that have organized to advocate *for the interests of their particular group*—both of which might be considered forms of “self-advocacy.”

For organizations that aspire to practice advocacy *in genuine partnership with* individuals and groups,

advocates often “follow the lead” of their partners. For example, an advocacy organization wouldn’t determine the issues or methods used by a community-organizing group—they would only help the group achieve the objectives it wants to achieve. When advocates largely or entirely determine the issues or lead a given process, some would argue that this approach is engaging in *advocacy for*, not *advocacy with*. Yet in some cases, *advocacy for* may be entirely appropriate and necessary, such as when a lawyer overrules a client’s suggestions because acting on them would undermine the client’s case in a court of law.

In other situations, the distinction between *advocacy for* and *advocacy with* may be blurry. For example, an academic institution that studies restorative-justice programs in schools may have research demonstrating that restorative approaches to school discipline provide a variety of benefits that punitive forms of discipline, such as suspensions or expulsions, do not. The academic institution may then coordinate with local nonprofits and community groups to provide public testimony supporting local organizing campaigns that are trying to institute restorative practices in school districts. In this illustrative case, the academic institution would be providing expert testimony *for* local organizing campaigns, but it may also coordinate *with* the local campaigns to deliver the testimony in their communities and speak to specific concerns identified by local organizers.

The following descriptions illustrate a few forms of advocacy that may play a role in organizing, engagement, and equity work:

- *Advocacy for one’s own interests* (e.g., a student asking her teacher if she can rewrite a paper or retake a test), and *advocacy for the interests of others* (e.g., a community nonprofit working in collaboration with their local school to start a new program for special-needs children).
- *Advocacy conducted by individuals operating independently* (e.g., a parent advocating for their child’s educational needs), and *advocacy conducted by organized groups of people* (e.g., nonprofits forming a coalition to advocate for the interests of a particular interest group in a community).
- *Advocacy conducted in face-to-face interactions and in-person social contexts* (e.g., parent meetings with school administrators, door-to-door petition drives, presentations to the local school board), and *advocacy conducted remotely through online platforms, telecommunications, or established media outlets* (e.g., social-media hashtag campaigns, automated calls to constituents, letters to the editor).
- *Advocacy that challenges authority* (e.g., students organizing to challenge a proposed district policy), and *advocacy that utilizes authority* (e.g., a school social worker advocating that a student receive specialized support or be readmitted to school after being expelled).
- *Advocacy intended to achieve specific short-term goals* (e.g., the admission of a student to a school or program, modifications to a particular school policy, the passage of an education referendum), and *advocacy intended to achieve general long-term goals* (e.g., raising awareness of institutionalized discrimination in a school, educating people about gender identity, developing leadership skills in a youth or parent population).

- *Advocacy that is attempting to achieve equitable, worthwhile, or beneficial goals* (e.g., eliminating discrimination, rectifying injustice, or improving the culture in a school) and *advocacy that is attempting to achieve unfair, self-interested, or harmful goals* (e.g., parents advocating for public-school policies that advantage their children while disadvantaging other children, groups pursuing their own self-interests in ways that harm larger community interests, or lobbying intended to increase the profits of a single business at the expense of public safety).
- *Advocacy that is adversarial, oppositional, or confrontational* (e.g., student protests, teacher-union strikes, or public campaigns against an issue), and *advocacy that is supportive, collaborative, or non-confrontational* (e.g., teachers proactively meeting with parents to help address a child's academic difficulties, administrators listening to student-organizing groups so they can better understand and resolve the students' concerns, or a school partnering with a local nonprofit to expand programs for underserved students and families).

To learn more about how principles can be applied in education organizing, engagement, and equity work, see [HOW PRINCIPLES WORK](#) →

Advocacy Strategies

The following advocacy strategies may play a role in education organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Distinguishing between equitable and inequitable advocacy goals**
2. **Distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms of advocacy**
3. **Recognizing and avoiding paternalistic forms of advocacy**
4. **Building community knowledge, skills, and confidence**
5. **Cultivating allies and building solidarity across groups**
6. **Strengthening conviction and courage**

1. Distinguishing between equitable and inequitable advocacy goals

In schools and communities, individuals or groups with authority, influence, expertise, or funding may leverage their power to pursue a wide variety of goals that may or may not be intended to produce

more equitable systems or outcomes for students and families.

- In many communities, for example, parents will organize in opposition to new policies proposed by a district or school, but this mobilization of “parent power” might be focused on achieving either equitable or inequitable goals. For example, parents may oppose a school closure because they want to retain a successful community school in their neighborhood that lawmakers intend to consolidate into a larger, lower-performing school to reduce operational costs (a goal that challenges inequity), or parents may oppose a school closure because they don’t want children of color from a neighboring lower-income community to be bussed into their affluent suburban school (a goal that maintains inequity). As these examples illustrate, advocacy—leveraging power to achieve specific goals—may be used to advance or impede educational equity.
- It’s important to recognize that some forms of advocacy may be used to benefit underrepresented or underserved populations, and some forms may be motivated by self-interest, such as the desire to maintain inequitable policies, systems, practices because the status-quo happens to benefit one’s child or family. When powerful advocates mobilize to oppose equitable policies, equity advocates often need to organize and build power to advance equity.

2. Distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms of advocacy

Just as advocacy may be used to promote equitable or inequitable objectives, advocacy may also be motivated by more or less legitimate concerns. Yet because the relative “legitimacy” or “illegitimacy” of any given position can be the subject of disagreement, debate, or even conflict in schools and communities, it may require a process of investigation, evaluation, and reflection to determine which positions are supported by legitimate concerns and which are not.

- For example, a high school may propose starting the school day at a later time because **research indicates** that adolescents are more alert, engaged, and academically successful in high schools that start later in the morning, and that they are also less likely to suffer from conditions such as sleep deprivation, fatigue, cognitive impairment, anxiety disorders, or depression. In this example, educators are advocating for a policy change they believe will benefit students, but parents may organize to oppose the policy change because a later start to the school day will complicate their work and childcare arrangements. In addition, the line between justified and unjustified concerns may be blurry: some parents may oppose the late-start policy simply because they don’t want to be inconvenienced, while other parents may oppose the policy because they will lose their job if they arrive late to work and can’t afford additional childcare five days a week.
- Balancing opposing community concerns can present a variety of complications for leaders, organizers, and advocates, but evaluating the relative legitimacy of competing concerns

can provide helpful clarity and direction. When advocacy and power are leveraged to benefit the few over the many, for example, or to serve the narrow interests of a single group over the common interests of a diverse community, equity advocates may need to take a bold stand and fight back. But when opposing groups both have legitimate concerns, or the relative legitimacy of competing concerns is unclear, equity advocates may instead choose to consider compromise options or engage in collaborative problem-solving.

Discussion: Adversarial Advocacy

In education organizing, engagement, and equity work, it is important to recognize that adversarial forms of advocacy may be motivated by justified concerns and intended to achieve positive outcomes, and some forms of “supportive” advocacy may have positive intentions but result in negative outcomes. For example, student protests intended to raise awareness of discrimination in their school may compel administrators to take actions they may have otherwise neglected or avoided. On the other hand, offering emotional support to students who have been victims of discrimination may generate the appearance of positive action, but it might fail to address the underlying systemic causes of discrimination in the school, thereby allowing the discrimination against other students to continue.

3. Recognizing and avoiding paternalistic forms of advocacy

Advocacy may be used in ways that affirm, empower, or liberate marginalized individuals and groups, or it may be used in ways that continue to restrict, disempower, or subvert marginalized individuals and groups. Well-intentioned advocates—often unconsciously or unintentionally—may take actions they believe are in the best interests of marginalized groups, but those actions may ultimately be self-serving, exploitative, or even oppressive. When doing advocacy work, leaders, organizers, and advocates should be mindful of the hazards of well-intentioned paternalism—i.e., the practice of inadvertently patronizing, undermining, or disempowering marginalized groups when attempting to “help” them.

- Paternalistic forms of advocacy may occur because leaders, organizers, and advocates are basing their actions on assumptions or stereotypes, or because they are unaware of their own biases or self-serving motivations. Paternalistic advocacy is more likely to occur when marginalized groups are not consulted or involved in a decision-making process, or when advocacy is conducted *on behalf of* marginalized groups, not *in genuine partnership with* them. To minimize the potential for paternalism, for example, advocates can involve representatives of marginalized groups in every step of the advocacy process, from the first planning meeting through the evaluation and analysis of outcomes.
- Advocates should also recognize that some forms of involvement will be more effective than others when it comes to surfacing and avoiding paternalism. For example, using a survey to solicit advice from community members (advice that may ultimately be either acted on or ignored at the discretion of those in positions of authority) is less likely to help advocates

avoid paternalism than authentically sharing leadership authority, roles, and responsibilities with community members.

- Paternalism also tends to happen when advocacy is primarily motivated by a desire for recognition, acceptance, approval, or praise, or when those in positions of power are either unwilling to change their beliefs or require advocacy work to be done on their terms. For example, self-proclaimed equity “advocates” may enjoy the feelings of self-righteous or superiority that come from judging others for alleged equity infractions, but they may become dismissive, defensive, or hostile when someone calls out their own behavior and comments. Or school leaders may claim they want to “authentically engage” with families, for example, but they may reject ideas suggested by students or parents because they believe the proposals would be too “disruptive” or because they might make some people “uncomfortable.” Advocacy is more likely to be paternalistic if authority figures and others with power are reluctant to support any significant disruption of the status quo, or they are unwilling to embrace inconvenience, discomfort, or challenges to their authority or beliefs.

4. Building community knowledge, skills, and confidence

If advocacy is defined as *utilizing power to help those with less power*, advocates can use their authority, influence, expertise, or funding to support the development of knowledge, skills, and confidence in marginalized communities—and thereby increase the ability of those communities to advocate for themselves.

- In schools and communities with a long history of unequal power dynamics, inequities often persist because the individuals and groups who are being mistreated or underserved lack the power, knowledge, skills, or confidence they may need to effectively advocate for their own interests. For example, if families don’t understand how their child’s school system works, and they haven’t been exposed to more equitable schools, they may be less able to make informed choices, advocate for their child’s needs, or recognize how the system is fundamentally unfair and how it could be changed. If families do not have experience with community organizing, and if they are unaware that national groups exist to support local organizers, they will likely be at a disadvantage if they attempt to mobilize other parents to oppose a school policy they believe will adversely affect their children. And if families haven’t received a political education that helps them understand how systems can abuse power, and they don’t know about groups in other communities have successfully fought back against misuses of power, they may be less confident about opposing abuses of power in their own community and more likely to accept the status quo as “just the way it is.”
- Building the capacity for self-advocacy in a community can take time, and it may require up-front investments from leaders, organizers, and advocates that only produce demonstrable results months or years down the road. The distinction between advocacy that is done *for* and advocacy that is done *with* is useful when thinking about advocacy as a capacity-building strategy. Advocacy that is done *for* individuals and groups is often focused

on providing short-term services. In these cases, advocates may help community members secure basic needs or resolve a particular problem, but they may not be providing the kind of sustained education or support that helps community members become more self-sufficient and self-confident over time. Unlike “service-oriented” approaches to advocacy, capacity-building advocacy is often done *in partnership with* community members. Advocates may provide training, modeling, or mentoring that helps community groups acquire new skills, for example, or advocates may provide guidance and funding that helps newly established community groups compensate volunteers and hire staff, pay for consultants and training programs, or buy materials and advertising for a local campaign as they work toward developing a sustainable operation.

5. Cultivating allies and building solidarity across groups

Expanding the number of advocates or advocacy groups involved in a process, project, or campaign can significantly improve its overall influence and effectiveness. For example, coalitions that consist of several groups and organizations can typically mobilize more staff, stakeholders, resources, and funding as they work to achieve a shared goal than individuals or groups pursuing similar goals independently.

- Broadly defined, the term *ally* has two general connotations: (1) allies are people who join forces with others to pursue shared goals, and (2) allies are members of dominant or majority groups, or participants in powerful systems or organizations, who are committed to using their position, authority, influence, expertise, funding, or other forms of power in a partnership with those who have less power or who have been harmed by abuses of power. Similarly, *solidarity* can be defined in two general ways: (1) the practice of different individuals and groups joining forces, and (2) the practice of being an ally. If advocacy is defined as *utilizing power to help those with less power*, both types of allies, and both forms of solidarity, can play important roles in organizing, engagement, and equity work.
- For example, “grasstops” leaders (i.e., those with authority, influence, expertise, funding, or other forms of power) can intentionally and proactively reach out to and involve “grassroots” groups, leaders, and organizers in their advocacy work. Similarly, those who work *within* systems of power—such as schools, public institutions, philanthropic foundations, or influential organizations—can intentionally and proactively work in solidarity with those who are working *outside* of those systems. It’s important to note, however, that the practice of equitable collaboration and authentic solidarity between groups with unequal degrees of power typically requires honest discussions, working agreements, full transparency, and other strategies to ensure that the partnerships remain equitable and authentic.

6. Strengthening conviction and courage

Forms of advocacy that challenge established systems of power are often resisted by those in positions of power or those who benefit from the status quo. For this reason, advocacy that is conducted in solidarity with marginalized groups may require conviction, courage, and even sacrifice at times. In some cases, advocates may experience workplace retaliation such as harassment, demotion, or firing, for example, or they may be excluded, shamed, or publicly attacked by community members, opponents, or former colleagues. Advocates may also be criticized by fellow advocates and allies who disagree with their philosophy, strategy, or methods.

- Leaders, organizers, and advocates can anticipate and prepare for foreseeable criticism. While some attacks cannot be anticipated, of course, others are likely to follow predictable patterns. To the extent possible, preparing for more predictable forms of criticism can help equity advocates avoid being caught off guard. When advocates respond rashly or reactively, rather than thoughtfully and strategically, to criticism or attacks, conviction may be undermined in the midst of a hasty or disorganized response. But when groups have a pre-planned response strategy, as well as fellow advocates who are at-the-ready to lend support, conviction is less likely to be shaken.
- Reaching out to fellow leaders, organizers, and advocates who have experienced attacks, and who may have successfully fought back against those attacks, can not only help advocacy groups prepare a more informed and effective response strategy, but it can also help to build the moral courage and strength of conviction required to weather or resist attacks, particularly by those who may be using their positions of power to defend inequitable systems and policies.
- While organizing, collaboration, and alliances help to build power among advocates with shared goals, isolation can produce apprehensiveness, indecision, and doubt. Knowing that other individuals and groups have taken similar stands, and that their knowledge, wisdom, and insights can be relied on, can help to instill greater confidence in one's convictions, particularly at the outset of an organizing campaign or engagement process when potential outcomes and repercussions are still unknown.

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