Fledgling Activist Takes Wing
Testifying for What I Believe In

BY CARRIE HOLMBERG

Last April 12, I traveled with a colleague to Sacramento to testify about a bill pertaining to National Board Certification before the legislative assembly's education committee. I am a 28-year-old, fourth-year teacher at Wilcox High School in Santa Clara who began National Board Certification because I wanted to keep my learning curve steep. On that day, Assembly member Tony Cardenas (D-39th district) was sponsoring Assembly Bill 2597 to increase the number of $1,000 subsidies available for California teachers pursuing National Board Certification.

In a week in which I saw my rent increase another $150 a month, our only car break down permanently (our $1,200 car needed $800 worth of repairs), and little sleep as I finished my National Board portfolio, I told members of my support team at Stanford that I'd testify. It was a nerve-wracking, eye-opening, but, above all, worthwhile experience, and I learned how to share publicly my views as a teacher.

As teachers, we know speaking out makes a difference. Often, however, our demanding lives keep us from drafting letters, reaching out to parents, or attending school board meetings. Testifying touched me so profoundly, I wanted to write about it. I hope my story will encourage you to speak out, too.

When I started National Board Certification, I knew what I was getting into—as much as you can really know. The process requires teachers to submit a portfolio containing student work, videotapes of their teaching, their written analysis of their teaching and students' learning, and documentation of their professional collaboration and their outreach to families and community. They must also complete assessment center exercises that typically take six hours. It is a rigorous, reflective process that unquestionably improves teachers' practice and students' learning. The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards and National Board Certification are about reforming education.

Applying for certification is expensive. Next year the fee will be $2,300. Of the 471 California teachers who applied for the $1,000 grants the state offered this year, more than half were turned down. I was one of them. So, when given the opportunity to affect future funding for hundreds of teachers like myself, I went for it.

Getting ready for this trip involved much more than finding a ride there. The night before, just when I thought I had my testimony ready—colleagues had said my text was "powerful"—the phone rang. My Aunt Gigi, who had gone from first-grade teacher to Washington state assembly member and cochair of the education committee, had read my email the day before.

As I listened to her outline how to engage the legislators, I knew her advice could serve any teacher who wants to speak out. It is advice we already know. We use it with our students. We teach it to them.

She drew a deep breath. "It's well written," she said about my testimony, "but it's a whine."

"A whine?" I asked, trying not to sound disappointed. I wanted to hear, "It's terrific, Carrie. Good luck tomorrow!"

She told me that what I wrote wasn't what I had told her about the certification process as we had walked a beach on Puget Sound the month before. I was excited then. Now I was complaining.

I had thought that the only reason I had been invited to testify was to talk about the financial hardship teachers faced because of the high fee. I had left out the positive things that characterized my experience.

"Whines work sometimes, but I'd suggest changing your tone, completely starting over," Aunt Gigi said. "Speak from your heart. Show them how you and your students are benefiting from National Board Certification." When she mentioned students, she became a teacher again, one teacher talking to another, the first grade teacher I had grown up loving.

As I listened to her outline how to engage the legislators, I knew her advice could serve any teacher who wants to speak out. It is advice we already know. We use it with our students. We teach it to them. What she said, I later realized, was the kind of advice I give my students as they are learning to write. These are the points she made:

1. First, remember your audience. Get titles right and use them, even if the speakers who testify before you don't. The legislators have thousands of ways they can spend education dollars. Acknowledge this. Then let them know that the number one way to improve students' learning is to assure that there is an effective teacher in every classroom. Tell them, "You can make this happen."

2. Second, use the phrase, "Because of National Board I had to learn where each and every student is academically and to provide evidence that my teaching boosted their achievement." Legislators want to invest in measurable student improvement. Tell them the process is risky—financially and professionally—and you are willing to take this risk, because you want to be the best public school teacher you can be.

3. Third, tell a story if you have time. Talk about students. Show them how one particular student improved because National Board Certification inspired you to try something new. Bring a copy of your portfolio. Hold it up. Invite the legislators to browse your work—especially bright, colorful student work—after your testimony.

Aunt Gigi reminded me that legislators understand dollar figures. She suggested I tell them how much I still owe on my school loans. Changing my original tone wouldn't mask the truth.

Before we hung up, my aunt, my government advisor, recommended that I get some sleep and write my testimony early the next morning. If I wrote it word for word, I could submit it for the record. She recommended that I read it aloud three times, then put major phrases on cards. That I speak from the heart. That I just be myself. She made it sound simple. And really, it was.

At midnight, I set my alarm for 5:15 A.M. I finished the new version of my testimony at 7:00 A.M. The few hours less sleep mattered little compared to the potential return. So often parents, administrators, and even our colleagues don't know what is working well in our classrooms. How could state legislators possibly know? Here was an opportunity to make a difference.

That day as I spoke, I could feel the effect of Gigi's help. I began, "Thank you, Madame Chair and members of the committee..." and told my stories. I told of Jenna's transformation when I
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included art in the classroom, of inviting Julie’s mother to teach a class—methods inspired by the National Board process. I told the truth and sounded like me. When I finished, several committee members smiled. Two congratulated me on my portfolio, and one even gave me a thumbs up, mouthing, “You did a good job.” It was the first bill that day to pass unanimously.

That night I read Jonathan Lovell’s article, “Blood Money,” in the spring issue of California English urging all teachers to speak out eloquently and repeatedly. It inspired me to write about testifying. It didn’t really hit me until I read his article that I was becoming an activist. The words I had written at the end of my portfolio had become real. There I wrote that in order to do justice by my students, I would have to lobby, even agitate. But I didn’t realize how good testifying would make me feel until I did it. I felt like a real professional.

Finally, I am a member of a thriving community of teachers. A dozen within my department share and write curriculum with me. A good friend and a support team at Stanford help me every step of the way toward certification. My department chair acts as mentor, editor, and confidante, and she gives generously of her time and seemingly boundless energy.

In order to speak out, a teacher doesn’t need a thriving department or an aunt who is a state representative. Speaking out simply means articulating what works in our classrooms. It could mean inviting students to write class newsletters for parents, or publishing student poems on a bulletin board near the district board room. Helpful communities exist many places within reach, even online. Getting involved with your local writing project, attending NCTE conferences, and joining the discussion at the online listserv CATENet (www.englishcompanion.com/CATE_catenet.html) can help you build a professional network that will prove invaluable when it comes time for your inner activist to speak up. I hope that time is soon.

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