You Can Make a Difference:  
A Teacher’s Guide to Political Action

by Barbara Keresty, Susan O’Leary, and Dale Wortley

$14.00; 110 pages

Reviewed by Elyse Eidman-Aadahl

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl is co-director of the National Writing Project.

The 1998 election featured a record number of candidates running on “education platforms.” Sections of these platforms included prescriptions for curriculum, for the content of professional development programs, as well as plans to test both students and teachers. We are entering an era in which legislators, businessmen, and community groups are interested in governing not only the financing of public education, but also the process and substance of education, traditionally the domains of professional educators. These are tough times for classroom teachers. Are we surprised that so many teachers and parents are eager to get into the political process?

A new book from Heinemann responds to the sense of urgency that many educators and parents feel to fight for the programs and practices they believe in. The book grows out of the on-the-ground experiences of the three authors, who have created a primer for teachers and parents considering action in their own districts. This is a book intended “to help (readers) learn quickly what to do, how to be effective as (they) become involved politically, and how to maintain some balance as battles intensify.” (xxi)

You Can Make a Difference is a slim volume offering clear and practical advice for organizing our colleagues and community members around local policy issues. Suitable for use by parents and older students as well as teachers, the book leads readers through common-sense strategies for initiating new programs, maintaining district support, and organizing for the tough fights. Drawing on their own experience as advocates for Reading Recovery, the authors provide sound, basic advice for local political action where coalition building and media savvy are as important as protocols for addressing the Board of Education. The book is specific and detailed, including sample meeting agendas, board handouts, and press releases from their own campaign.

Ultimately, Keresty, O’Leary, and Wortley hope that readers go beyond a pragmatic, single campaign view of advocacy for education. Their final chapter, “How to Think Politically,” surveys lessons learned from figures like Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Saul Alinsky, Thomas Jefferson, and Thich Nat Hanh. No, they are not urging readers to sacrifice family and job for full-time political action, but they do mince lessons for leadership in the public sphere.

Throughout, their commitment is to the possibilities of democracy and to the fullest definition of citizenship. In making their case, they quote Jefferson and draw examples from the life of Vaclav Havel in the belief that these figures provide models of a civic life for the teacher who orchestrates a school board presentation and for the parent who speaks passionately at a board meeting.