Making Sense of Conflicting Grades

BY MARGARET A. SMITH

My community, which includes parents of the 62,000 students who attend schools in Volusia County, Fla., has been baffled over the conflicting nature of Florida's school grading system of A, B, C, D, F based on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, and the federal system of pass or fail. While many of the 80 schools in my district received a state grade of A, the same schools were considered failing under No Child Left Behind's annual yearly progress system.

Even with our school district's focused communication efforts, parents and public have struggled to make sense of this dichotomy.

Contributing further to the confusion of rating schools by two different standards has been Florida's high standing in elementary reading on the National Assessment for Educational Progress — even while a myriad of elementary schools are failing under the federal NCLB standards. Press releases from the Florida Department of Education have touted our state's success on NAEP reading scores, which have perpetuated this mixed message.

Well Apprised

Through my attendance at AASA conferences and meetings, as well as the updated information in the legislative section of the AASA website, I've kept current on what is happening with congressional reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the U.S. Department of Education's waiver request initiative. I've found my participation in AASA's legislative advocacy conferences particularly instrumental in staying abreast of the federal issues and the urgent need for changes. I've visited congressional offices in the U.S. Capitol to provide input on desired changes in federal laws and regulations.

Meanwhile, AASA's public policy staff — Bruce Hunter, Noelie Ellerson and Sasha Bartoš — are always available, and Executive Director Dan Domenech has presented updated details at a Florida superintendents conference.

I have used these learning experiences to share important information about NCLB's annual yearly progress with my school district instructional staff, the 10 Florida school districts of the Central Florida Public School Boards Coalition, and the Florida Association of District School Superintendents. I've urged them to contact federal education officials and congressional leaders about the pressing need for change in NCLB/SEISA. I provided these groups with AASA's electronic All Children Can Learn resolution for adoption and the Call...
to Action sample letter for use in contacting elected members of Congress.

**A Strong Push**
As a Florida representative on the AASA Governing Board, I worked with our state association to push the Florida Department of Education to request the NCLB flexibility waiver. The Florida department prepared an excellent application, which the state's commissioner of education submitted. School districts anxiously await the outcome.

AASA has performed outstandingly on two fronts, in front of both Congress and the U.S. Department of Education, making a difference in moving to one set of robust and reasonable standards for measuring student proficiency. The strong position of AASA in supporting U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s call for flexibility in NCLB has provided states with a chance to apply for that waiver. Meanwhile, AASA continues its work with Congress on reauthorization of ESEA. I hope my small involvement has contributed to effecting the desired changes.

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**Advocacy Based on Effective Relationships**

**BY BENNY L. GOODEN**

When AASA and other membership organizations try to engage individuals in advocacy, a frequent exhortation is “Contact your representatives in Congress.” Professional membership groups also stress that written communication is more powerful than phone calls to a representative’s office, and they encourage personalizing the message for maximum impact. Recent security concerns related to congressional mail has made e-mail a preferred form of contact for most Capitol Hill offices.

While all these suggestions are true and can make professional groups more effective in promoting specific positions, my three decades of involvement with members of Congress has helped me to realize that writing letters, sending e-mail messages and making periodic phone calls are only small pieces of effective advocacy. When all is said and done, advocacy on the federal level begins and ends with continuing relationships between school leaders and members of Congress and their staffs.

There are two important aspects of lasting relationships with members of Congress. The first involves getting to know the representative early in the service. This involves meeting informally during campaign appearances before the candidate is elected and continues at every opportunity when the successful legislator visits in the local community.

This process is nonthreatening and provides opportunities to give congressional representa-
tives a local perspective on public school successes. Every contact should end with an invitation to visit local schools when time permits. Local schools provide good photo opportunities — especially when tied to an accomplishment involving local students or to a particular issue that shows how schools benefit from federal support.

Connecting local school leaders to congressional offices in Washington requires a methodical plan, and AASA staff can help with this. The letters or e-mails directed to members of Congress on specific and timely issues are often little more than documents to be addressed by staff with a perfunctory reply stating, “Thank you for contacting me. Be assured that I will consider your concerns when this matter is under review.” Frequent contacts may guarantee your name will be recognized, but unless a direct connection is made to someone “real” in the local school district or at the state level, the correspondence may be relegated to the office file.

**Appointed Rounds**

Years ago, I began the habit of visiting Washington once or twice each year. Sometimes this was associated with AASA’s advocacy conferences, but often it involved other opportunities to be in the city. I always schedule at least one day or parts of two days to visit congressional offices of my senators and representatives.

Because I’m from Arkansas, a small state, I