Awakening the Biology Education Advocates within Us All

I was recently chatting with a fellow NABT member and the conversation turned toward a discussion of advocacy and its role within professional organizations. My thoughts drifted back to my days as a member of the National Education Association’s (NEA) Congressional Contact Team. This network of teacher/leaders from across the country maintained regular communication with members of Congress to help them understand the impact of potential legislation on students and teachers. In that context, we were advocates for or against particular issues or legislation and were actively helping to advance the political advocacy program of the NEA Representative Assembly. We were aided in our endeavors by well-trained and organized political-advocacy staff members. Many professional organizations have such staff and are actively engaged in the mission of direct lobbying and political action. Presently NABT is not among them, but that doesn’t mean that there is no advocacy for biology education within NABT.

First, we have a responsibility as professional educators and citizens to not sit on the sidelines as politicians make decisions about education in general and biology education in particular. Much of what is proposed as legislation and policy is misguided at worst and has unintended consequences at best. As members and representatives of NABT, we have to respond by advocating laws and policies that support high-quality life science education. No matter where we teach, education decisions are political decisions and we are all potentially impacted by them. Whether these ideas come from the school board, state house, or Congress, if we don’t identify and expose bad legislation and decisions, our profession and our students will suffer. Since everyone has been to school and feels that their opinions about education are valid, we can expect to hear much about schools and schooling during the upcoming election cycle in American politics. The rhetoric will likely be heated and much of it will be ill informed, with plans that may not be beneficial to education, educators, and our students. As individual members, we must respond to misstatements of fact and wrong-headed proposals. We must also recognize good proposals and decisions and commend those who make them. If we will not step up to advocate for education, then who will? And do those who do have the same interests and perspectives as professional life science educators?

Second, as members of NABT, we are advocates for the identification and promotion of those practices that could be termed the “state of the art.” Every issue of The American Biology Teacher includes articles and research findings that define current best practices. At every NABT Professional Development Conference and sponsored workshop, we encounter exceptional biology teachers who share their practical expertise, along with scientists who help translate their research findings for classroom application. Every NABT position statement defines what the best life science educators know and do as they practice the art of teaching in robust science-education programs. We must use this expertise and these resources to be our own best advocates.

Across the nation, biology teachers are regularly confronted with direct challenges to the delivery of effective life science education, from the public as well as from their local school authorities. Recently, the board of one of the nation’s largest school districts voted on a policy change that could have eliminated student work with animals. The NABT position statement on the use of animals in the classroom served as a basis for a response from us that helped dissuade the district from taking this drastic action. All of us at NABT will continue to use our position statements to write letters and provide guidance in defense of high-quality science teaching. We have been remarkably successful in these efforts, in large part because of NABT’s long history of formal and informal advocacy in support of life science education, but also because NABT and its members are recognized as leaders in the profession.

Finally, we must be advocates for NABT to other teachers, particularly those who are not members. NABT attracts teachers who think and act differently from typical educators. NABT teachers are exceptional and are looking for other exceptional teachers with whom to collaborate. Most likely you are an exceptional biology teacher or you want to become one. So, how do you make the case for membership for yourself and propose that others follow your path? I’m working on an “elevator pitch” to use when folks ask me about NABT. The business world has long known that you may only have a brief moment – perhaps the length of an elevator ride – to get your message across.

So, here is my pitch in support of NABT:

NABT is a member-run professional organization composed of some of the best life science educators in the country and those who want to teach like them. We define what constitutes best practice in the profession and provide opportunities for professional growth and collaboration. We are advocates for robust life science education. NABT is where biology teachers belong.