



Jim Broadway

Jim Broadway's

Illinois School News Service

Smart coverage of state education policy since 1995

A civics seminar for public school advocates



Subscribe

Copyright 2016 (c) James Broadway All Rights Reserved

Volume 22, Number 59, October 13, 2016

Teacher leaders plan education advocacy

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Teachers came from every corner of Illinois, highly accomplished teacher leaders, National Board Certified Teachers among them. They gave up their Columbus Day holiday weekend and gathered in Springfield to focus on advocacy.

The program was entitled: "Elevating teacher voice: Paving the way for teacher advocates." It was sponsored by Advance Illinois, the Illinois Education Association, [Teach+Plus Illinois](#), [Educators 4 Excellence](#), and a Gates Foundation initiative called "ECET2" (Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teaching & Teachers).

It was an excellent event for me to "cover." It brought back memories, because the educators were examining in detail some concepts that were familiar to me from 1984 to 1998, back when I was a registered lobbyist at the state level. (I have not registered for that activity since. I've been clean since 1998.)

They covered the basics. How does a bill become a law? How do you talk to policymakers? They prepared for discussions on specific topics, for activities of advocating for high quality professional development program funding, for example. They dug deeply, learning to shape their arguments around policymaker's motivations.

They focused on real-world, timely issues. One document was designed to stimulate action to update Illinois' Spanish language arts standards, to replace the current out-dated standards. Another described an ISBE initiative designed to "increase transparency and accountability" in teacher preparation.

Another discussion paper noted the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the reauthorized federal education policy, requiring that educators' professional development programs must be "evidence-based, ongoing and job-embedded." That is, it must be "tied to the work teachers are doing."

An interesting and timely discussion paper asks the question: "Is Equal fair?" Right, it delves into the concept of devoting state resources to the education of children based on those children's needs, rather than in distributions of dollars in equal amounts per student attending in a particular district.

Each discussion paper included references to related materials on the topic being examined, contact information for staff members who are coordinating ongoing discussions and a timeline for additional meetings leading to an achievement, to the resolution of a problem or to the final development of a project.

The advocacy elements under discussion were excellently drawn. For example, it was pointed out that the policymaker's motivation should be understood by the advocate before any meeting to seek his support. Is it a desire to be reelected or to raise money for that? Does he aspire to higher office - or just to be liked?

The more you know about the interests of the decision-maker the more likely you are to find a way to guide him toward the decision that is best for your program.

Is there a particularly important decision-maker to whom you seem to have no access? If so, can you identify someone to whom you do have access and who also has access to your "target" decision-maker. This kind of discussion leads to the development of such advocacy tools as the "key person network."

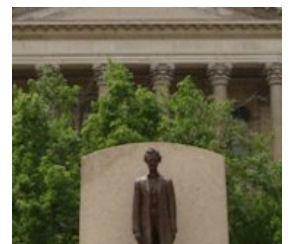
Highly accomplished educators carry their passion for teaching wherever they go. Unlike many other professionals, they "talk shop" constantly; the discussion at lunch is always about how to get the students turned on to learning, how to give them confidence and infuse them with desire to grow intellectually.

Clearly, the same level of passion went into the design of this week's program.

NOTE: As a teacher from District U-46 and I agreed, policy issues will arise, after next month's elections, the resolutions of which will affect public education in Illinois for decades to come. Refining advocacy skills is a timely process.

Teachers provide insights on Common Core. The [Center on Education Policy](#), a Washington, D.C.-based education policy research institution, have distributed a report describing elementary teacher "focus group" discussions of the Common Core State Standards held in Illinois and three other states - Delaware, Utah and Wisconsin.

[\[Click here to download\]](#) the report and/or related documents.]



The discussions followed a similar round of surveys and focus groups in 2015. The goal of the research is to develop ways that the learning standards can be improved or made more helpful to teachers. Generally, the Center found that teachers "feel good about the standards and the level of rigor they demand of students."

But among the eight participating Illinois teachers there was a kindergarten teacher who suggested that the rigor for the youngest children might be too much, might be "pushing children too quickly" and "not allowing for developmental appropriateness." Other teachers agreed and contributed to the discussion.

Teachers bemoaned the way CCSS turned political. An Illinois teacher and others "spoke about how opposition to the Common Core from some parents, political leaders, and others has complicated their job," CEP researchers reported.

"I think there's so much misinformation out there," the Illinois teacher said. "It would be nice to just have a conversation of 'What is it that you're against?' I think Common Core, essentially, is just increasing the standards for 21st century learners, so ... I don't know what's necessarily bad about having high expectations."

The report summarizes such discussions for most of its 39 pages. There are some policy recommendations that the CEP proposes, based on the teachers' observations, and the first one is that the *voices of teachers should be heard* as part of a school or district's discussions on how to implement the CCSS.

Neither the teachers nor the schools where they teach are identified in the report or related materials. The schools were chosen as "typical" examples of schools based on demographic and other characteristics and the states were chosen to get all standards (PARCC, Smarter Balance, home-made) represented.

Look to the brain for political insights. I first heard about Phineas Gage from [Dr. Patrick Grim](#), professor of philosophy at State University of New York-Stony Brook. (I have recommended his course entitled "Philosophy of Mind" at The Teaching Company. It is now posted at YouTube.com, [all 24 30-minute lessons](#).)

It is early in "Lesson 03: [Brains and Minds, Parts and Wholes](#)" that Grim introduces Gage who, as a railroad construction crew foreman in 1848, was injured in a workplace accident. A 43-inch long, 13.25-pound iron rod was blasted from a rock, pointy end first, into Gage's face and out the top of his skull.

Here's a [written summary of Gage's experiences](#) that is consistent with Dr. Grim's presentation. Amazingly, Gage was not killed, may not have even lost consciousness. A doctor arrived an hour after the accident and subsequently recorded that he could see Gage's brain pulsing as the victim sat waiting.

Gage eventually recovered but was not rehired by the railroad. While he had been previously viewed as one of the company's most steady and reliable workers, he had since the accident turned "into an untruthful, short-tempered, psychopathic, braggart [who had] fewer inhibitions in talking about sex."

A subsequent report in a Massachusetts Medical Society bulletin described Gage as having become "fitful, irreverent, indulging at times in the grossest profanity (which was not previously his custom), manifesting but little deference for his fellows, impatient of restraint of advice when it conflicts with his desires...."

The doctor who treated Gage and drafted the medical society report concluded that "his mind was radically changed, so decidedly that his friends and acquaintances said he was 'no longer Gage.'"

It was 146 years later that [neuroscientist Hanna Damasio](#) and her colleagues at the University of Iowa examined the evidence (Gage's skull and the iron rod that blasted through it) and determined that: "The damage involved both left and right [prefrontal cortices](#) in a pattern that, as confirmed by Gage's modern counterparts, causes a defect in rational decision making and the processing of emotion."

So the damage to his prefrontal cortices turned Gage into "an untruthful, short-tempered, psychopathic, braggart [who had] fewer 'inhibitions in talking about sex,' into a man who indulged 'in the grossest profanity,' showed 'but little deference' for others and recoiled at 'advice when it conflicts with his desires.'"

Do we know any prominent political candidate who seems to exhibit such traits? As you may know, the prefrontal cortices are in the frontal lobe, the last part of the human brain to evolve, the part that facilitates effective planning and gives us the control we need to suppress impulses driven by emotion.

Now, I'm not suggesting that Donald Trump's prefrontal cortices have been damaged. More likely, they are simply not very well developed, shriveled from lack of use. As high school teachers know very well, teenagers do not have fully developed frontal lobes. They usually become effective in one's early to mid-20s.

That may be why Trump's behavior is often compared to that of a teenager.

The connections between nodes of neurons in the brain develop from experienced associations. But in a person who was not disciplined as a youth and has spent his adult life surrounded by yes-men, never disagreed with, never given corrective guidance - such a person might lack empathy and impulse control.

So when Trump seems petulant - or when he merely engages in "locker-room banter" - it may be that he is exhibiting the behavior of a teenager, of one whose "executive function" system of the brain is not completely there. It's just a thought. There's an explanation for all behavior no matter how horrible.

Postscript on Trump: It occurred to me that some readers might see the commentary on Trump as sarcasm or as an effort to belittle the Republican. If so, I would not deny it. The effects of his seemingly immature behavior on others have been so negative - especially as they relate to women - he may deserve some roughing up.

But, no, I'm sincere in my belief that there may be a link between Trump and Phineas Gage, a shared characteristic - the lack of a properly functioning prefrontal cortex. Dr. Antonio Damasio, husband of researcher Hanna Damasio, told the New York Times that the effects of frontal lobe damage have always been mysterious.

"Why do these people behave so poorly in the social world, when in fact they are smart?" he said, adding that Mr. Gage epitomized this. "Everyone could tell he was still smart, but he behaved like an idiot." A similar observation might be made for Donald Trump, who seems to have [descended into a dark place](#).

Sad.

Invoice Reminder: To those of you who have received an invoice by email, be aware that THERE WILL BE NO PAPER INVOICE MAILED TO YOU. If you need to have another invoice emailed, use the contact link below to tell me. I deeply appreciate your support of ISNS. This service cannot exist without you.

The ISNS Archives link is [at this URL](#). The secret **password has been changed to:** surprise. Please keep it a secret, just between us school policy insiders. The Archives page links you to ISNS newsletters distributed this year and in 2015.

Your inputs - questions, comments, suggestions - are valued. For twenty years ISNS has been guided by wisdom "from the field." To contribute in this way, just [click this link to our contact form](#).