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What Does It Take to Be A Child Advocate?

“If you speak up for a child, you are an advocate,” my good friend Nancy Amidei says, and she is right. So, without knowing it, you are an advocate simply because you belong to PTA. When you speak to your child’s teacher, you are an advocate. When you bring up an issue to your local PTA, you are an advocate. When you have a carnival to raise funds to provide after-school programs, you are an advocate. Of course, when you take your cause to the school board, or to the legislature or Congress, you become an advocate extraordinary, but the principle is the same.

I got started in PTA in Washington State when I attended a site-based council meeting at my daughter’s elementary school and voiced an opinion about multi-age classes. The next thing I knew, I had volunteered for a committee to explore the subject, and then was asked to serve on the PTA board and the site-council. That led to more advocacy work and to working with other parents to raise money for classroom grants, for field trips, and for teacher appreciation. Then along came a school levy. Before long I was president of the PTA, and things followed as they often do when you get excited about PTA and learning more and doing more. And you know what? The skills I learned and used as a PTA officer are the skills you need to be an effective advocate. How to organize, how to plan, how to work with people, how to persuade volunteers to do things for PTA.

Being a PTA advocate is simply being a good PTA member. It is not difficult. More importantly, it can give you a satisfaction beyond anything else you do in PTA. You have all the skills and aptitude within you right now to do the job. Of course, National PTA and your state PTA offer training and workshops to improve on your advocacy, and to learn more about the legislative and advocacy process, so take advantage of those resources.

It has been my experience that people like to get started in doing something new to them by tackling something close to home. As council president, I found that we got more people to become active advocates with the legislature after they worked through the council to get the school district to take responsibility for the emergency preparedness program and after we had forums on class size, education funding, and the need for safe and nurturing environments. They learned that talking to their legislators was not really scary, and that it was easy to call the legislative hotline, send an email, or write a letter expressing their opinions. And they learned the satisfaction of working with a group of other parents to do good things for children. That’s what PTA is all about. That’s advocacy in a nutshell!

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