CHAPTER · ONE

Storytelling

LESSON

Advocacy Starts with Your Why

I always wanted to be a teacher. I was the kid who, like so many of us, lined up my dolls and taught them math before I knew how to add. My parents were both teachers (my dad until retirement). My grandma taught kindergarten. In the lax, hippie-ish 1970s, my mom used to drop preschool-age me off for Grandma to babysit in her classroom. My grandma had a piano in her class. She'd play it, and I got to sing along with the big kids. Oh, school, you had me at that happy, off-key hello.

I never contemplated any job but teaching, and I thought my parents knew this heading into our first conversation about my college plans when I was sixteen. My dad had just taken me on my first college tour and sat me down with my mom as soon as we got home. So, they asked, what do you think you'll study in college? Wow, here was my shining moment to make them so proud! (Maybe they'd even let me borrow the car later!) "I want to study education and be a teacher," I beamed back, fully expecting them to pat me on the back and welcome me into the family business.

The gap between my expectations and reality in that conversation was a big determinant of the course of the rest of my life. My mom started to cry, and my dad started to yell. There was talk about how they must have let me down to have not exposed me to other options. They threatened that they wouldn't pay for college if I went into teaching. Didn't I want a more financially secure life? My loans would be too big to pay back on a teacher's salary. Ultimately, the message they repeated that day and for years after was, "Teaching is not for smart and ambitious people." It was the most insane, depressing, and surprising thing I'd ever heard. They were my role models, and they were teachers. They were my role models *because* they were teachers.

I didn't believe that message then, and I don't believe it now. The work of my life has been showing it to be wrong. But I've met hundreds of second- and third-generation teachers whose teacher parents gave them the same message. Every time I work with a new group of teachers, I ask if any have educator parents who discouraged them from teaching. Every group has at least one. They are not unique. In a recent study of fifty-three thousand teachers, 70 percent said they were unlikely or very unlikely to recommend teaching as a career. Only 2.7 percent said they'd encourage it.[1] The 2015 winner of a $1 million worldwide prize for teaching excellence used her platform to discourage others from entering teaching.[2]

I wrote this book because of my belief in the power of teachers and teaching. My day job, running a nonprofit focused on teacher leadership, is amazing because I get to meet hundreds of incredible teachers from all over the country every year. I am humbled by their work ethic and inspired by the stories of how they solve problems with their colleagues and for their kids. Many of those stories appear in this book. These teachers see how our schools and the teaching profession need to change to meet the challenges kids face in the twenty-first century, and they are making change happen in an outdated system that often works against them. I want to spread these stories and help other teachers become leaders in improving how schools work for students.

The core belief that drives both this book and my professional life is, *If we're going to change the teaching profession to better serve kids, especially the poor students and students of color whom our system has let down in the past, teachers need to be the leaders of that change.*

The vision that animates this work is of a true profession where teachers are the indispensible leaders of problem solving in the field, where *smart* and *ambitious* are the first words used to describe teachers. It is a vision in which great teachers stay for more than the now-typical three-year stint through a dynamic career that marries teaching with leadership. This vision has student growth *and* teacher growth at its center. This vision of our education system is achievable. Only teachers can get us there.

What Is Your *Why*?

We all have an instinct to seek our own vision of a better world—for our students, for our own children, for ourselves. Advocacy is personal. Finding your voice on any issue starts with tapping into why you care. Communicating *why* you care matters. The *why* is an expression of your values and an invitation for others to connect to them. The *why* is what motivates you to persevere through challenges.

Here's the *why* that motivated me to write the book.

Teachers across America are a diverse group, yet they are unified by a common and palpable frustration. They have lost their voice in the

decisions that affect their students. This book is for every teacher who wants to reverse this damaging trend.

Evidence of this professional frustration is all around us. In a 2014 survey of twenty thousand teachers, a mere 2 percent felt that the opinions of "teachers like me" were heard and valued in national education decision making.[3] In the ten-year period from 2003 to 2012, teachers' feelings of autonomy in six key areas of decision making, such as curriculum and teaching techniques, decreased precipitously in every demographic group and every type of school.[4] Most teachers would say that nobody is listening to them. There is plenty of evidence suggesting they're right.

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It does not need to be this way, and there are important exceptions to this narrative. I founded Teach Plus in 2007 and began offering a policy fellowship to excellent teachers to give them the skills and knowledge to play an influential role in education decision making. The view for teachers in our network looks different from the norm. Consider the events of just the past year or so:

- In late 2015, student testing had become a national flashpoint. President Obama was planning to speak on the issue, but first wanted to discuss it with two current teachers. I got the call to send well-informed teachers to meet with him.
- A few months later, fifty teachers gathered to celebrate their recognition as state teachers of the year for their respective home states. Two of them had been trained in our program. Every year for the past seven, at least one of our fellows has been selected for this honor.
- Only twenty-five "negotiators" in all of the United States were selected to help establish the rules for states on the new Every Student Succeeds Act to replace No Child Left Behind. Two were teachers. One was trained in our program.

In seven locations around the country, teachers whom our team has trained are taking equally important seats at decision-making tables in their states and districts. They are running for leadership roles in their unions, helping forge changes in their contracts and state laws, and launching innovative programs that improve student achievement in struggling schools. They are changing the lives of their students and, at the same time, using their daily experiences in the classroom to change the world.

Their sense of empowerment stands in stark contrast to most teachers—but so does their understanding of how the system works. I believe that if more teachers knew what these teachers knew, we could spark a revolution in teacher empowerment.

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When education decisions are made without teachers at the table, students suffer the consequences. Since my time as a classroom teacher, I have spent the past two decades trying to figure out what teachers need to know and be able to do to influence the decisions that affect their classrooms. This book is a summary of what I have learned. It is for every teacher who wants to be a voice for students and for the teaching profession.

The Story of My Path to Teaching

So how did I get from where I was when I heard my parents' message to here? I'll use this chapter to share more of my own story as modeling for connecting a personal *why* to being a catalyst for change on a specific issue.

Instead of trying drugs or dating the wrong guys, my act of youthful rebellion was taking education courses and eventually student teaching as an undergrad. I probably got away with it only because my dad was too distracted to notice, given how dramatically all of our lives changed before the start of my sophomore year of college. My mom lost her six-year battle with cancer that summer, adding pressure to my career choice. If I went into teaching, I would be doing the one thing she had hoped I wouldn't.

Of course, I did. I became a teacher of sixth-grade earth science and eighth-grade geography. I loved the magic that surrounded us when I could close my classroom door to the rest of the world and focus on just my students. But, after a few years, I came to understand the message my parents were trying to communicate. There were few opportunities for career growth or recognition of success in teaching, few chances to connect with colleagues, and few ways to have a larger voice in addressing what my students needed.

My role today is as a teacher of policy, helping current teachers understand and influence the larger system. Although my K–12 teaching experience was a formative element of the worldview I bring to this book, I am writing as a current policy wonk and leader of a big fan club for teachers (Teach Plus). I am not a K–12 teacher today and haven't been for the better part of two decades. After leaving the classroom, I spent my first ten years in the policy world observing the gap between teachers and the people making decisions about their classrooms. I did everything I could to understand how policy worked and why teachers were so rarely at the table. Then I founded Teach Plus. For the past ten years, with a team of awesome world-changers, I've lived in that breach that separates teachers from policymakers. This book is a view from the gap between the two worlds.

The Story of My Path into Policy

August 14, 1998, was a day that changed the direction of my life. Since March of that year, I had been diligently sending applications to every middle school in the Boston Public Schools, hoping to make a move from my current position in Worcester, Massachusetts. I met David Driscoll, the commissioner of education in Massachusetts, at a low moment, and spouted off at him about my great frustration that hiring timelines were so late—it was August 14!!—and I didn't have a job yet for the fall. He invited me to come work with him on a new set of teacher quality initiatives. Once I said yes, the teaching interviews started coming in, but I had already sealed my fate.

I rationalized taking the job, thinking that I would have the chance to impact the lives of many more students by working in policy. That thought excited me. What I didn't realize was that taking on a role in influencing the lives of many would mean losing the deep relationships with individual students that were the best part of my teaching life. That trade-off is huge, and I think many teachers exiting for policy are surprised by the contrast in work environments and the depersonalized nature of policy. That's why I've made it my mission to create paths that allow teachers to stay in the classroom and also have a voice in policy. Decision makers need to hear more from actual practitioners. Teachers should not need to leave the classroom to have a larger voice.

The Lessons I Learned Transitioning from Teaching to Policy

My transition from teaching to policy was a culture shock. I learned three fundamental lessons that year that shape my work as a translator between teachers and policymakers to this day.

Lesson 1: Teachers Are Rarely Invited to the Policymaking Table

You might have suspected this, but not had any evidence. It's true.

When I was special assistant to the commissioner, my desk was very close to his office. I had the privilege of joining him in many meetings and rarely met a current, or even former, teacher in these rooms. Our relationship developed around one question that he asked me often:

"Celine, you were a teacher. What do teachers think about _____?" You could fill in that blank with any education initiative du jour, from charter schools, to the new state tests, to the changes to teacher certification and teacher leadership on which my work was focused.

If he asked what teachers thought about alternative routes to certification—the program I was working on—I'd tell him they loved it. That wasn't because I knew how they felt one way or another. It was because I wanted to keep my job. On most topics, though, I'd feel guilty about responding on behalf of actual teachers when I was sitting there in

an office job. I'd put the question back on him: "Why don't you just ask teachers who are still in the classroom?"

The question made him frown a bit, evidence of a bind he had no easy way of undoing. He grumbled a bit and then explained that talking with teachers didn't help and sometimes made things worse. They had many things that they wanted from him, and most of them were impossible for him to give in light of budget and legal constraints and of rules that came from the federal government.

I believe that he wished he could answer the question differently. He came to his role via a traditional path, and his resume checked all of the boxes educators traditionally care about: longtime math teacher, followed by principal, district superintendent, then commissioner with the state Department of Education.

He was looking to make the pressing decisions that his role demanded, and teachers would inevitably come looking for something else.

Recognizing that policymakers and teachers rarely talked was one of my clearest lessons in transitioning from the classroom to policy. Part of that lesson was recognizing that policymakers actually wanted to know what teachers thought. Like my boss the commissioner, most knew that teachers' perspectives were needed to make good decisions about districts and schools. But at the same time, they saw getting those perspectives as risky and slow, and as likely to cause new problems as it was to solve the ones already on their plates.

Lesson 2: Policy Influence Doesn't Come from Telling the Story of Your Class but from Solving Other People's Problems

When I was a newbie to the policy world, one of my first assignments was to help secure funding for teacher leadership, specifically for mentoring programs that supported new teachers. My role was to meet with legislators and other stakeholders, share my experiences as a recent teacher who saw the value of this type of support, and outline the Department of Education's plan for rolling out a new statewide program. We had built a $6 million budget for recruiting, selecting, and training teacher leaders as mentors and paying them a stipend for their extra work. I needed to make the case for that line item staying in the final state budget.

I could not have been a bigger believer in the work I was doing. I had had an informal mentor in my first year in the classroom and had concrete ideas about what worked and what did not work. I saw my job as one of sharing the details of classroom life to help others understand its challenges, and the possibilities of strong induction for helping a novice teacher overcome those challenges.

I struggled mightily in meeting after meeting. Although the folks on the other side of the table were polite and nominally interested in the stories of my middle schoolers and my early struggles as a teacher, the questions they asked were at a fundamentally different level than I was prepared to address. I was operating at the school level, and they were operating at the system level. They were interested in my responses on issues like these:

- Are you proposing a tax hike to pay for this? If not, what would you cut from the current budget?
- In which locations would you start, and how would you scale the program?
- Is that really enough money to do all that you are proposing? Are program costs expected to go up or down over time?
- How will we make sure the best teachers are mentors and that new teachers are paired with experts in the same subject?
- How will we know if the program is working? What does the research from other places tell us?

I was under the mistaken impression that my job as an advocate was to help people understand my job as a teacher. In fact, the job I needed to be doing was essentially the opposite. I needed to equip legislators to do *their* job—balancing budgets, assuring constituents that tax dollars are spent wisely, ensuring that resources are distributed equitably across the system. Without my help in answering *their* questions in the context of my classroom experience, they would lack the ammunition they needed to advance the cause about which I cared so deeply. I failed to make my case on their terms, and the line item never made it into the budget.

I learned that policymakers have a limited set of tools at their disposal to help teachers. I should have had a clear understanding of what those tools were and how to leverage them. You will by the end of the book. For now, just recognize that everyone—you, other teachers, policymakers across the table—has some level of self-interest. Most often, helping others solve their problems is a big step on the path to solving your own.

Lesson 3: There Is an Invisible Policy "Playing Field" That Most Teachers Need Help Recognizing

Everything felt foreign during my first year out of the classroom. After all, I was the girl who only ever dreamed of being a teacher. What I remember most about that time was stepping into the shower each morning and having an imaginary Talking Heads soundtrack playing "How did I get here?" in my head. I missed my kids.

We talked about kids every day at the Department of Ed, but it was a global group, Kids with a capital *K*. The Kids had no actual names. The people in these conversations weren't picturing individuals—maybe the one with the first signs of a moustache, another with frizzy hair you just wanted to pull into a ponytail—when they talked about Kids. It was not at all like a faculty meeting about actual kids with names. We talked about research on Kids. We talked about stretching dollars to reach Kids.

Then, just like my former sixth graders who returned to me for eighth grade, fully assimilated into the adult bodies that were just taking form two years earlier, I became assimilated into the policy world. I didn't have real kids with real names to talk about in real time anymore. I had a deep, system-level understanding of Kids and the ways state and district decision making can help or hurt their chances of success.

Much as I hated to say it and have spent my life fighting against it, I came to understand the reasons that teachers were often excluded from the table. That they were still bothered me, yet I had become immersed in the mind-set and unspoken rules of policy. I came to see that there is an invisible playing field on which policymaking takes place, and in most cases, teachers cannot recognize it. It is the realm of the capital *K* Kids.

When you finish this book, you should have a working understanding of what policy is. Yes, much of policy will always be feeling in the dark, but you will know how to make meaning of the contours.

My description of the policy playing field will focus on the three key pressures every policymaker faces:

- **Equity.** The responsibility of the public education system is to provide *all* students an opportunity for success.
- **Resource scarcity.** Public needs will always be greater than the availability of public funds.
- **Accountability.** Given limited resources, it is important to know whether public funds are being used to yield the best possible school experience for *all* kids.

To summarize, I share this sentence that we use in our training: "Policy is the process of determining **who** gets **what** resources, **when, where,** and **how**."

As a final note about the policy playing field, I'd like to point out that I use the terms *policymakers* and *decision makers* interchangeably and as shorthand for many different people in many different roles. The terms are intended to be broad so that you can apply them to your own circumstances. They encompass district superintendents and other central office administrators; school committee members; state legislators and other state officials; and nonprofit, think tank, and philanthropic influencers. My use of the term decision maker in relation to system-level issues is in no way meant to suggest that teachers are not decision makers. Instead, it is to point out that there are government structures in place that privilege others with decision making and budgetary authority.

The Story of My Path to Supporting Teachers

I pursued my PhD in education policy to make sense of the gap between policy and practice. It was my good fortune to have Milbrey McLaughlin, Linda Darling Hammond, and Joan Talbert—the true

masters—as my advisers. What I learned was that lots of people cared about teacher leadership and teacher professionalism.

In my studies, I gravitated toward a particular defining feature of what it means to be a professional. One attribute that distinguishes professions from other types of work is that *practitioners* are the ones to solve the big challenges that exist in the field. Teacher professionalism—and the improved status and influence that it entails—hinges on teachers asserting their authority as experts. We can't fix schools without teachers, true professionals, leading the way. This notion is both obvious and wildly controversial.

What I also learned in grad school was that there were very few organizations focused on expanding teacher leadership opportunities and getting teachers to the decision-making table. In launching Teach Plus, I set out to create opportunities for teachers to be leaders in solving the problems that face education at all levels of the system. Through our policy fellowship, we select, train, and activate teacher leaders to advance solutions to policy problems at the district, state, and even federal levels. We also offer a separate *instructional* leadership track for teachers who want to lead their peers through professional development and school-level change.

Over the past five years, the growth of a movement around teacher leadership has become a key positive strand of the school improvement narrative. Amid plenty of challenges, teachers have begun to lead in places and in numbers never seen in the past: districts around the nation are now negotiating teacher leadership into contracts; superintendents, state commissioners of education, and civic organizations are enlisting teachers as advisors; unions are finding new ways for teachers to own their work through teacher-led professional development; and the focus of federal education efforts has turned to teacher leadership and ensuring effective teachers for all students. I am proud of our organization's catalytic effect and grateful to the teachers who have taken up the call to lead.

During the 2015–16 school year alone, more than twelve thousand teachers participated in our teacher leadership training or one of the activities offered to our network. Although the number of participants has grown rapidly in a short time, it still represents a fraction of the teaching force. For our students' sake, the teacher leadership movement must spread.

What Should You Expect in the Pages to Come?

I hope that every teacher reads this book. I intend it as a commonsense explanation of the universe *outside* of school that affects nearly everything that happens *inside* a school. I hope this book is used to drive a fresh conversation in unions and among those taking on new teacher leadership roles—most of whom have never spent time on "the other side," the side they are seeking to influence. Too often teachers feel they need to leave the classroom to get the knowledge necessary to fight for system-level changes. That's the opposite of what should be happening. My aim is to make it more possible for current teachers—the real experts—to see the entry points for using their teacher voice to change the way education policy is made, without leaving the classroom.

My aim is to create a book that is a one-stop shop for teachers who are interested in learning about the big picture that affects their classroom, and how they can affect it right back. You might use it to figure out how to incorporate five minutes of advocacy into your life each week, or you might use it to become the next Al Shanker, transforming the role and power of teachers for generations to come.

The book is one part Policy and Advocacy 101 textbook, one part how-to guide, and one part memoir of my decade in the trenches working to get teachers a place at the table.

Policy and advocacy textbook This is the nuts-and-bolts information that is effectively the price of admission to credibly participating in policy conversations. This knowledge makes the difference between feeling around in the dark about what matters and what it is possible to change, and standing squarely on the policy playing field. It involves history, research, and description of how the policy process works.

How-to guide Beyond basic knowledge, I've added lots of concrete ideas for how to engage in decision making. They are examples from other teachers who have succeeded. To some extent, I worry that in today's polarized reform debates, many teachers might worry that doing anything other than fighting against all changes is selling out. I think that's a bad thing. Politics and policy are, by definition, an exchange of

ideas, a give-and-take that involves compromise. To be sensitive to the current climate, I've highlighted a bunch of examples as "non-sellout strategies" for taking action on the policy playing field.

Memoir I'm aware that some folks start to nod off at the mere mention of policy, so I've added lots of juicy stories that bring to life the humanness of the process and the power of regular teachers. Most of the teachers I've worked with, who have sparked real changes in their districts and states, are, like me, somewhat reluctant activists. They saw a need on behalf of their kids, then through our training saw their path to making a difference, and then they couldn't help but attempt to follow that path. That path never ends up being linear, so getting changes across the finish line sometimes feels like living in an episode of the Netflix political drama *House of Cards.*

There are many new communities of teachers emerging that seek to have a voice in education policy. They are generating much enthusiasm, especially among newer teachers, but most have not yet been able to translate that into concrete changes in districts and states. This book should offer a missing piece for aspiring teacher advocates who want to understand the audiences that their advocacy must persuade. I hope it sparks many more groups of teachers to form around the country and take action on behalf of their students.

The lessons and strategies described in the following chapters are intended to expose you to what happens on the other side of the decision-making table. If you're worried that this book isn't for you because your driving passion is social justice or personalized learning or charter schools or special education, ask yourself this question: *Is there someone or some group in charge of the rules and holding the purse strings, determining how this issue plays out in my classroom?* If your answer is yes, then you've come to the right place.

Key Takeaways

- ☐ Influence starts with storytelling, and storytelling starts with your *why.*
- ☐ Although 98 percent of teachers report that no one is listening to them, there are powerful exceptions to this rule.
- ☐ Teachers are rarely invited to the policymaking table.
- ☐ Policy influence doesn't come from telling the stories of your class, but from solving other people's problems.
- ☐ There is an invisible policy "playing field" that most teachers need help recognizing.

Notes

1. Tim Elmore, "Why Teachers Don't Recommend Teaching," *Growing Leaders,* February 16, 2016, http://growingleaders.com/blog/teachers-dont-recommend-teaching/?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=.
2. Randi Weingarten, "How the Teacher Shortage Could Turn into a Crisis," *Huffington Post,* April 16, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randi-weingarten/how-the-teacher-shortage_b_9712286.html.
3. Margery Mayer and Vicki Phillips, *Primary Sources: America's Teachers on Teaching in an Era of Change* (New York: Scholastic Education 2014), http://www.scholastic.com/primarysources/teachers-on-teaching.htm.
4. Dinah Sparks, John Ralph, and Nat Malkus, *Public School Autonomy in the Classroom* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015089.pdf.