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From LUNCHROOM to Legislation

Dive into the world of advocacy where your expertise can reshape school nutrition policies and discover how everyday heroes can turn passion into powerful change.

BY DYLAN LYNCH

ADVOCACY IS A MASTERFUL TOOL FOR CHANGE, especially when it comes to programs that involve school nutrition operations and standards. SNA plays a pivotal role in advocating for these programs, ensuring that policies and regulations support the work being done in schools across the country. Connecting with policymakers at the local, state and federal levels can have such an impact on the effectiveness and sustainability of improving issues currently affecting, not only your long-term success, but day-to-day tasks.

In this article, we explore the importance of "boots on the ground" advocacy and how school nutrition professionals can make their voices heard on Capitol Hill and beyond. Drawing insights from a recently released episode of SNA's podcast, School Food for Thought, featuring SNA's Cathy Schuchart, Vice President, Government Affairs & Media Relations, and Nichole Taylor, Public Policy & Legislation Committee Chair, we delve into the strategies and challenges involved in championing better policies for school nutrition.

With 19 years of experience, Schuchart has a deep understanding of the role advocacy plays in sustaining the industry. "We work every day to ensure that these programs are sustainable and that regulations are both achievable and rational. The most effective way to achieve this is through our advocacy efforts in Arlington, Virginia, where we engage with Congress and the USDA," she explains. These crucial discussions, involving all levels of membership within the Association, ensure that the voices of those directly involved in school nutrition are heard by the policymakers who can make decisions that drive the meaningful change we strive for.

In the world of advocacy, especially within specialized fields like school nutrition, having voices from those who are deeply immersed in the industry can be incredibly powerful. These advocates, who have hands-on experience and a clear understanding of daily challenges, bring insights into the ins and outs of school foodservice that only they will truly know. Their stories not only highlight the realities faced on the ground but also serve as a bridge between policymakers and the practical needs of those on the front lines.

Taylor, a culinary chef turned school nutrition advocate, shares her own journey into advocacy. "It was when I was looking at how we obtain funding, how we get our reimbursement, that really kind of made me look into becoming more active and being more vocal about our needs in these kitchens and cafeterias," says Taylor. Her transition from understanding the mechanics of funding to actively advocating for better policies highlights a common path many professionals in this field often take. Knowing the system can ignite a passion to improve it.

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>
> — Nichole Taylor

Overcoming the Fear

Many people find the concept of advocacy intimidating. What if I am not informed enough? How do I go about finding the right person to talk to? How do I make sure action is taken? Schuchart addressed these reservations by saying, "People think that they can't make a difference… How is it that one person at a school can go to Capitol Hill and make a case?" Taylor's advice was straightforward: "First and foremost, you're the expert. Share your story. That's the best thing to do." By framing advocacy as an extension of the daily communication and passion that school nutrition professionals already engage in, the process becomes less daunting.

One of the primary fears is the perceived complexity of the legislative process. Many professionals may feel overwhelmed by the idea of engaging with policymakers or uncertain about the impact they can make as individuals. However, Schuhart and Taylor emphasize that the core of effective advocacy lies in personal experiences. These narratives are tools that can resonate with lawmakersand personalize any bigger issues. You are the ones who hold the knowledge, the experience and the true facts as to what will improve your school meal programs, and as a result, improve the everyday health and wellness of the students you serve.

Understanding that school nutrition professionals are already experts in their field can boost confidence. They know firsthand the challenges and successes, making their insights invaluable to policymakers who may not be as familiar with the day-to-day realities. By sharing specific examples and outcomes from their own schools, advocates can illustrate the tangible benefits of supportive policies and the potential consequences of ones that don't line up with our goals.

Taylor encourages professionals to start by building relationships with local representatives and gradually expanding

their efforts. "Advocacy doesn't always start on Capitol Hill," she explains. "Begin at the local level, attend school board meetings and engage with community leaders. These smaller steps can build a foundation for larger advocacy efforts." Through persistence and a clear, compelling message, school nutrition professionals can indeed make a significant impact, proving that their voices matter on big issues.

Personal Stories Go a Long Way

Personal stories are powerful advocacy tools. Taylor emphasizes the importance of authenticity, saying, "Share that passion with your legislators. They need to know just how valuable you know the job that you do every single day is." Legislators, at any level, are more likely to respond positively to genuine, heartfelt stories from their constituents. It provides a human element that statistics and data cannot convey.

When school nutrition professionals share their personal experiences, they offer lawmakers a glimpse into the daily realities of their work. This personal connection can bridge the gap between policy and practice, fostering a new level of understanding.

It's no secret that personal stories help to humanize the broader issues at stake. They shift the focus from impersonal statistics to the lived experiences of actual, real people. It has a special effect on legislative proposals, making them more compelling and urgent, encouraging lawmakers to act. When advocates share their stories, they not only inform policy makers but also inspire them to support initiatives that align with these real-world needs.

It also builds a sense of rapport and trust. It demonstrates a commitment to the cause and shows that the advocate is not just another voice in the crowd, but someone deeply invested in making a difference. This personal engagement can lead to more meaningful dialogues and more effective advocacy efforts, ultimately driving policies that better serve the needs of school nutrition programs and the students they benefit.

The most important takeaway is that personal stories are a vital component of advocacy. They provide context, evoke empathy and create a powerful connection between the advocate and the policymaker. By sharing these narratives, school nutrition professionals can amplify their impact and contribute to shaping policies that truly reflect their needs.

The Power of Grassroots

Advocacy begins at home and extends far beyond trips to Washington, D.C. "We do this because we're very passionate," says Taylor. Recognizing everyday interactions as opportunities for advocacy helps us build a strong foundation within their communities. Engaging with legislators, whether directly or through their staff, is equally crucial. Taylor notes, "Do not get upset that you're speaking with the staffer … That is the heart to that legislator." Developing relationships with legislative staff can be just as impactful as meeting with legislators themselves. Following up after meetings is essential to keep the conversation going and ensure that your voice is remembered and pushed forward.

Celebrating Victories and Planning for the Future

Taylor emphasizes the importance of continuous engagement. She stresses the importance of connecting with regional members and focusing on the significance of participating in events like SNA's Legislative Action Conference (LAC). "Your work should start at your local level, in your local community, your local county, township, inside your own state, and then continue on," she advises. By starting locally, school nutrition professionals can build an advocacy network that resonates at the federal level.

Understanding the differences between legislative and regulatory processes is also crucial for effective advocacy. Taylor suggests attending 101 sessions at conferences to grasp these distinctions. "I think it's really getting that understanding of where you could be impactful for each area," she says. This knowledge helps advocates target their efforts more effectively, whether at the federal, state or local level.

SNA provides numerous tools and resources (*schoolnutrition.org/advocacy*) to support advocacy efforts, from toolkits for cafeteria site visits to action alerts on current legislation. Schuchart encourages everyone to utilize these resources and participate in events like LAC. "We have toolkits online with how to do a cafeteria site visit. We've got the action alerts that are always current with the next best, great piece of legislation that's out there, there's a lot of helpful stuff on the SNA website to help you succeed." **SN+**

Dylan Lynch is Editor of SN Magazine and Content Manager for SNA.

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