

ADVOCACY GUIDE: RESOURCE 3

Building a Team of Youth Advocates: Stories from the Author



For the past two years, I have been coaching a group of high school students in Davis, CA called “Distinguished Speakers”. As representatives from each of the four high schools in the school district, this group gathered to practice public speaking, learn new techniques, and connect to public opportunities to advocate for youth voice. Recruitment for the team was challenging. More than anything, the term “leadership” or “public speaking” brought with it all kinds of emotional reactions, from deep-seated fears and anxieties to an insistence that “being a speaker is not who I am”. It mattered whether students had negative experiences with public speaking, whether they viewed themselves as leaders, and whether they had a cause or issue that was important to them.

Ultimately, what made the difference was personal, one-on-one outreach from teachers, principals, and counselors. After identifying students who they thought were underrepresented and had important stories to tell, these personal interactions involved meetings where the educator explicitly invited them to the program.

According to the students, what made the difference was having someone tell them that they were capable of becoming a speaker and leader and that they had something valuable to offer.

If I could describe the first practice session, the word “uncertain” would come to mind. Everyone had vastly different ideas of what public speaking entailed, most of which included images

of someone standing at a podium in front of a crowd, presenting about an issue. As a coach, it was important for me to first disrupt any preconceived notions of what public speaking looked like, and instead expand definitions to include podcasting, stories, presentations, debate, discussions, and comedy. By trying out different methods, different student strengths emerged. For one student, Isabel, shyness transformed into delicate vulnerability when she had a chance to tell stories about aerial dance. For another student, Saif, debate unleashed a passionate urgency that was sometimes hidden behind his down-to-earth, conversational style. They embraced the challenge to discover what fit them and their message the best and took pride in mastering multiple formats.

Developing the team involved identifying important issues and making plans to present publicly, in addition to explicitly teaching public speaking skills. Once the students built up their speaking skills, they also increased their confidence to participate in discussions about social issues. After only a few sessions, students generated a comprehensive list of issues that mattered to them and soon had more content than they needed. To focus the group, we had a discussion about what all the issues had in common and how they might organize these issues under a theme or central question. While their group theme of “self-expression” was still quite broad, it helped the students focus on how they might individually contribute a unique voice or perspective. After that first discussion, I didn’t quite appreciate how unifying this theme would be. It brought everyone together and strengthened their bonds as a team.

My experiences with this group also highlighted the way I could be most useful: project management. While they had countless ideas, they needed me as an advocate for finding speaking opportunities or creating our own events. They needed a check on what scope of work would be most realistic and advice on how to create committees and plans to make sure the work got done. With just a little bit of structure and a lot of confidence-building, the team was able to advocate for consequential issues and tell meaningful stories in places where their voices mattered. By thinking beyond traditional models of youth leadership programs, the students could look beyond what they had always perceived as “public speaking” and “leadership” and instead focus on the advocacy that mattered most to them.

