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Leadership, Relationships, and Strategy: Keys to Legislative Success in 1997

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As anyone who has worked with the Oregon Legislature in recent years would tell you, achieving a 50 percent increase in a state-funded grant program in one biennium is not easy. Some would say it is impossible. But that's exactly what the Oregon Library Association did in 1997.

Ever since the passage of Ballot Measure 5 in 1990, competition for state general funds derived from the state income tax has been fierce. Measure 5 required that state taxes replace local property taxes as the major funding source for Oregon's public school system. Another initiative in 1994 requiring mandatory prison sentences for many felons made the situation even worse, since it required a massive expansion of the state corrections system. On top of that, the desire to expand eligibility for Oregon's groundbreaking Oregon Health Plan added more demands on the state general fund.

Even with the remarkable growth of Oregon's economy in recent years, the demands on state funding are greater today than ever before. So how was the OLA able to swim against this gigantic tide and achieve a dramatic increase for the State Library's Ready to Read grant program in 1996?

The first key was leadership. The OLA legislative committee, led by Karyle Butcher, proposed an ambitious goal of funding the Ready to Read grant program at \$1 per child (birth to 14). It received the endorsement of the OLA executive board to make the goal OLA's highest priority for the 1997 legislative session. The committee worked closely with OLA President-elect Ed House on a "One to Get Ready" campaign that provided information to local libraries. It also enlisted their help informing local legislators about the important work public libraries were doing to introduce preschool children and their parents to reading and to keep children reading after they entered school.

The second key was relationships. As OLA lobbyist Nan Heim has said again and again, success in politics is all about establishing relationships with political leaders. Something as simple as stuffing envelopes for a few afternoons to help a legislator in his or her campaign creates a lasting relationship

that can make all the difference. Such a relationship proved indispensable to OLA's efforts in 1997.

Who would have known that a freshman legislator from Deschutes County would be in a key position to advocate for the Ready to Read grant program? When OLA member Jim Hayden of Redmond volunteered some time to Ben Westlund's campaign for District 55 state representative in the fall of 1996, he established a relationship that would prove invaluable to OLA. As it turned out, Westlund was appointed to the General Government Subcommittee of the Joint Ways and Means Committee that would be hearing the State Library's budget request and making decisions about the Ready to Read grant program. Even though he was a freshman, Westlund quickly established himself as an up-and-coming leader in the Republican caucus and on the Ways and Means Committee.

Another key relationship turned out to be the relationship that Deborah Jacobs and Karyle Butcher had established with state Rep. Barbara Ross of Corvallis. As it turned out, Ross was also appointed to the General Government Subcommittee and was a leader in her Democratic caucus in support of the Ready to Read grant program.

As always, Nan Heim used her excellent relationships with all of the legislators to advocate for the Ready to Read grant program. Nan and her associate Jody Fischer made many visits to key legislators to pave the way for the Ready to Read grant increase.

After leadership and relationships, the third key was strategy. OLA Legislative Day, held just a few weeks into the legislative session, was used as a kick-off for the final push for the "One to Get Ready" campaign. Two opportunities to achieve the funding increase were created in the legislative process. The first would be the State Library's budget bill, HB 5039, that was heard by the General Government Subcommittee. In addition, OLA introduced its own bill in the Senate, SB 509. This bill would make a much needed substantive change in the law governing the Ready to Read grant program, but it also contained a section to provide additional funding for the program.

OLA Legislative Day was a great success. The turnout of librarians and trustees was excellent, and Nan Heim was able to engineer a hearing in the Senate Education Committee for SB 509 on Legislative Day. The hearing drew a large audience of OLA members and resulted in an enthusiastic endorsement from the Senate Education Committee.

After Legislative Day, there was a break in the action lasting a couple of months. Progress in the early part of the legislative session was slow because many new members and new committee leadership had to do a lot of learning on the job. With Oregon's new term limits law, this will probably become the norm

See Leadership page 20

Leadership

(continued from page 9)

in the future. But things did pick up in late March when the State Library's budget hearing was scheduled. As usual, OLA was there to testify, and their testimony concentrated on the Ready to Read grant program.

OLA's excellent strategy was to try to give the General Government Subcommittee members a real taste of how local libraries used Ready to Read funds. The most compelling testimony came from Angie Johnson of the Canby Public Library. Angie was a library aide whose job was to take Ready to Read grant-funded books and story programs out to local child care facilities, including many with predominantly Spanish-speaking and low-income children.

Angie brought examples of the library materials that she took to the day care sites and told about her own background of growing up in a Spanish-speaking household where books were not available. Any subcommittee members who were not already convinced of the importance of Angie's work, and the work of many other children's library staff in Oregon, were certainly convinced by the time her testimony was over.

Through the leadership on the General Government Subcommittee of Rep. Westlund and Ross, the committee approved a recommendation to increase funding for the Ready to Read grant program from 50 cents per child to 75 cents per child, a 50 percent increase. At the subcommittee's recommended funding level, the grant program would for the first time exceed the million dollar mark, a total of \$1,058,632 for the biennium.

The March budget hearing proved to be the highlight of the session and the fulfillment of the OLA's successful legislative strategy. But the game was not over. The recommendation of the General Government Subcommittee languished in the full Ways and Means Committee. This caused some anxious moments for Nan Heim and the legislative committee. However, they were continually reassured by their legislative "champions," Rep. Westlund and Ross, that all would be well in the end. And it was. On June 30, 1997, HB 5039, carried by Rep. Westlund, passed unanimously in the House. On July 2, 1997, the bill passed the Senate, also by a unanimous vote.

The success of OLA in achieving a 50 percent increase for the Ready to Read grant program is a textbook case of how to be successful in the Oregon Legislature. It takes bold and committed leadership, strong relationships with key legislators, and wise political strategy. Leadership and strategy are perhaps the easiest to come by. Oregon is blessed with many fine library leaders, and OLA's lobbyist Nan Heim is one of the best political strategists in Salem.

The relationships are the trickiest element to supply to the equation, simply because, with 90 members in the Legislature, you never can be sure who you will need to be a champion. It was *mostly* good luck that Rep. Westlund and Ross were in the right place at the right time for OLA in 1997. If OLA wants to rely less on luck in the future, OLA members must heed Nan Heim's advice and work hard to cultivate every legislator to be a potential champion for libraries. 