**Telling Your Story**

*Chapter Goals: After reading this chapter, you will be able to:*

* *Understand the power of storytelling in leading advocacy efforts for school choice*
* *Identify some tangible ways that you can share your story that are relevant to advocacy and have some templates to begin to create your own story*

Part I - The Power of Story

The art of storytelling is an incredibly effective method of persuasion. Whether you are trying to convince someone to buy a new kitchen appliance, sign-up for a gym membership, or join a campaign for social change, stories are a great tactic for convincing someone to take action. While storytelling can be particularly powerful, it is also extremely accessible - everyone has a story. When thinking about advocacy, effective story tellers know how to tailor their story to their specific audience, in addition to keeping their story clear, concise, and compelling.

*Why is storytelling so compelling?* Researchers and philosophers have been pondering this question for centuries. Going back to Ancient Greece, the philosopher Aristotle made the point in his writings on rhetoric that one of the ways to make an argument was by trying to influence the emotions (he called it *pathos*) of the audience. Stories are an excellent way to make a pathos centered argument that attempts to shift the emotions of your audience.

*You will hear some describe storytelling as an exercise of the heart*. Stories can build a connection between the audience and the storyteller. If people can listen to your story and feel connected with you, you will be able to persuade them. That’s why keeping your stories relatable is a great tactic for storytelling.

Additionally, you should think about the response that you want people to have when you share your story. After someone hears your story, should they be laughing, crying, or maybe feeling more empathetic? If you can successfully evoke a particular emotion among your audience, it will be easier to use your story to convince people to take action.

In a variety of contexts, stories are an impactful tactic of persuasion. Next, we will specifically talk about what makes stories so effective in advocacy.

Part II - Stories Making Social Change

Storytelling has been an effective tool for making social change. By creating bonds between people and evoking emotions, telling an effective story is an excellent way to inspire someone to take action.

If you look across global history, many successful social movements and campaigns for change have utilized storytelling to gain additional supporters and increase awareness of their work. Whether it’s telling the stories of leaders, participants, or groups of people, efforts for social change often have a story embedded within them.

Next time you see an advertisement on television, on the radio, or in your mailbox for a political candidate or mission focused organization, think about if a story is being told. Is a candidate telling you a story about their background to show you why they are qualified to be a leader? Is an organization sharing the story of someone impacted by their work? These stories are intentional; they are being used to form a bond with the audience (you) and are attempting to evoke an emotional response.

Sharing your story is an excellent way to become involved in campaigns for social change. Many people are very skeptical about making social change. They believe that influencing the lawmaking process or impacting an elected leader is nearly impossible. While advocacy work is undoubtedly hard, history is very clear, you can use your story to make a difference.

As a parent looking to advocate for school choice, you are uniquely positioned to tell your story to make social change. As parents, you have a clear connection to the issue - you want your children to have access to a phenomenal education.

Your story is also super relatable! Wanting a great education for your child is a near universal desire and many people will be able to connect to your story about why educational choice is important. This is why you want to center your experience as a parent when you are telling your story.

In Part I of this chapter, we said that *storytelling is an exercise of the heart*. By telling your story, you are building connections with others and you are evoking emotions. Storytelling can be a great practice for creating momentum around your cause and for turning your idea into a true social movement for change.

Sometimes, elected leaders and other officials aren’t as persuaded by storytelling. Instead of being moved by emotions or a personal connection, some leaders see their jobs as mainly passing and enforcing laws and regulations.

Don’t worry! If you are strategic and thoughtful about how you can use your story, *storytelling can start as an exercise of the heart and become an exercise of the mind*. In the next section, we will give you some ideas around how to practice telling your story and how to share your story to help achieve specific advocacy goals.

Part III - Practice Telling Your Story

If you are strategic about how you use your story, you can amplify your impact. Being strategic starts with your audience. It’s super important that you understand the audience of the story you are telling. Some questions to consider include:

* Who actually is the audience (e.g. other parents, students, community members, the school board).
* What is the makeup of the audience (e.g. gender, race, age, education level).
* What do you have in common with the audience?
* What differences exist between you in the audience?
* How is the audience connected to education and school choice?
* What are the interests of the audience?

After you think about and begin to define your audience (it can be helpful to write this down), you want to tailor your story for that specific audience. If there are particular parts of your story that will resonate with your audience, be sure to emphasize those parts.

Three other best practices to keep in mind:

* **Keep your story clear** - The audience should be able to easily follow your story. A good way to do this is to make sure your story follows a clear narrative arc (beginning, middle, end with a clear conflict and resolution). After hearing your story once, the audience should be able to give a quick summary to a friend who hasn’t heard your story.
* **Keep your story concise** - Make the story as concise as possible. You don’t need to include extra details. The audience wants to hear about you and your experiences. Adding excess detail can confuse the audience. They might get distracted, get lost, or not fully understand the point that you are attempting to convey with your story.
* **Make your story compelling** - After hearing your story, an audience should be excited about taking action and engaging in your effort to fight for school choice. You can get them excited by telling a compelling story. If there are parts of your story that are particularly interesting or engaging, focus on those. If there is a conflict in your story, focus on that conflict and make it clear how you resolved the conflict. When thinking about making your story compelling, think about your audience members. What is going to make people hearing your story tell their friends about you? You are using your story to inspire action, so make sure you are using the words and choosing the anecdotes that will help do that.

The best way to ensure that your story is **clear, concise, and compelling** is through practice. In the resources section of the curriculum, you will find a template for sharing your story.

**Activity**

You can practice writing your story [here](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ts0xOQrBi8g4_6fN-hc3xmhTuRYqTPPEn78KrIngmu8/edit). Practice is the best way to improve your storytelling and this template will allow you to draft your ideas. Many great storytellers come back to drafts and make edits to them. We recommend just getting started and then making improvements and changes as you get more experienced as an advocate for school choice.

**Tips and Tricks**: It’s a great idea **to have a few different versions of your story**. Each version of your story can have a particular focus and audience. One version can focus on how you helped your children navigate the education system - that version could be for other parents. Another version of your story could focus on why you got involved in your current advocacy effort and you can tell this story when you are trying to recruit others to join your advocacy efforts. Strong storytellers have a few different versions of their general story and they know when to use that story.

We recommend taking some time to brainstorm your story and to write your story using our template. Then, you can practice telling the story. You can start by practicing alone, in front of a mirror, or recording yourself on your computer or smartphone.

Once you’ve practiced telling your story a few times, we recommend sharing your stories with a few trusted friends, colleagues, or people that you are working with in your advocacy efforts. This is great practice for telling your story and this also is an excellent opportunity to get feedback. Ask your audience if your story was clear, concise, and compelling.

Part IV - Other Formats for Telling Your Story

Besides telling your stories to another group of parents or to a group of other stakeholders, there are some other methods of storytelling that are common in advocacy work. These include:

* **Writing an Op-ed** - An op-ed is an article that you write for a print or digital publication that you take a position on a relevant issue. As a parent, you can use your story to write an op-ed that advocates for stronger school choice. In an op-ed, you will want to use your story to take a specific position on a school choice related issue. Op-eds are generally 600-800 words. Check out our [op-ed template](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Unj2riA46bDxVFA286PUMb-ghBvRknnERcQC-JCR9l8/edit) that gives some advice on how to structure, write, and publish your op-ed.
* **Writing a Letter to the Editor** - Letters to the editor are generally shorter than an op-ed (usually around 200 words). Instead of focusing on a school-choice issue of your choosing, a letter to the editor would be a response to something that was previously written in the publication. In a letter to the editor, you can agree or disagree (or maybe both) with something that was previously published. Letters to the editor can be a great venue for sharing your story. You can share your experiences to explain why you are agreeing or disagreeing with a previously written article. [Here](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ugmpsf8995l1tkHU2usvBSC8LRrcytlWy_Lv-_qz9RE/edit) is a template for writing a letter to the editor to help you get started.
* **Giving Testimony at a School Board Meeting** - A school board meeting is an excellent venue for you to share your story. Generally, the public is able to give comments or testimony at a school board meeting. Testifying at a school board meeting is a great way to ensure that elected officials and senior leaders are clearly hearing your story. Our template for giving testimony will help you write and deliver your testimony. [This template](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oJQVgAsnTkWYYJrh9i4x1Xa41-4KRXAEGQKr1fDwES0/edit) and your testimony can be altered to apply to city council, state legislature, or other public meetings.

Part V - Parent Advocacy Toolkit Resource

If you are looking for some additional resources on telling your story, explore EdChoice’s Messaging Guide. This resource provides excellent ideas around communicating your story and your school choice work. Grounded in our years of experience running successful school choice advocacy campaigns, this resource will provide some relatable tips that you can adapt to your own advocacy efforts. The Messaging Guide provides information around sharing your story over television, in print media, and through social media channels.

*From this chapter, we hope that you deepened your understanding of why storytelling is an effective advocacy tactic. Additionally, we hope that you walked away with some tools for starting to build and plan your story, in addition to some ideas around ways that you can share your story with a wider audience.*