



THE MISSION IS THE MESSAGE

WHAT THE CLEAN WATER SECTOR CAN LEARN FROM THE TEACHERS' MOVEMENT

by Andrew Bliss & Anthony Viardo

It's Monday morning. Mrs. Kenworthy is up before 4:30 am. It's still dark when she feeds her kids and gets them ready for school. She's running behind, but she's ready for her class because she sacrificed her Sunday to grade papers and write a lesson plan. In the classroom, she laments the shortage of pencils. It'll be tough. Luckily, she bought boxes of pencils during her last grocery run. Her students, for this week at least, will have enough.

Mrs. Kenworthy was Anthony Viardo's teacher back in third grade. Her son, his close friend, told him about the pencils. Today, the nationwide teachers' movement is alive and well because of Mrs. Kenworthy and the thousands like her. Their plight widely resonates in the court of public opinion, a far cry from the early 1900s, when Margaret Haley gave birth to the movement by delivering a landmark convention speech ("Why Teachers Should Organize") decrying, among other things, the fact that teachers were invisible, disrespected, and not allowed to be free thinkers.

Over the last few decades, the teachers' movement has made impressive gains, especially in the area of mass communications. Political considerations aside, on the communications front, the teachers' movement has been successful; on the advocacy communications front, *wildly successful*. Consider that their issues are perpetually focused on by campaigns and educator groups are routinely seated at prominent government bargaining tables. Their issues are mainstays on news agendas, and in almost every media format—entertainment, informational,

news—teachers are almost always portrayed as sympathetic figures, even when a movie is titled, *Bad Teacher*.

And the advocacy results, whether directly or indirectly caused by the movement’s communications, are indisputable: education regularly tops all non-military spending in the Federal Government’s discretionary spending budget (\$70 Billion, 6% of the budget in 2015).

Taking Notes

It would be instructive for the clean water sector to take a close look at the teachers’ movement. The parallels between the teaching and clean water sectors are unmistakable. Both are heavily dependent on public funding, and both heavily regulated by government. Both provide a public service that society cannot do without. And both—as a “cause”—are fueled by a gross inequity: that is, the *enormous gap* between each sector’s crucial role in society’s survival and the importance that each receives by way of public support, acknowledgement and yes, public investment. The crucial difference between the teachers’ movement and the clean water cause today, however, is that the inequity that exists

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for educators is almost universally acknowledged by the public—to the point of *outrage* in some quarters—while the inequity that defines the clean water cause is . . . not.

I mean, who *hasn’t* heard of the plight of local teachers, whose classes are overcrowded to the point of bursting, whose classrooms aren’t cooled or heated enough to withstand the elements, whose resources are woefully inadequate, to the point that they’re forced to use their own (pittances of) salaries to buy crayons and construction paper for their charges? Some clean water advocates, communicators, and stakeholders would sell their souls for that kind of placement in the public or governing arena. Several would say they’re already there.

But clean water advocates have reason to be encouraged. The teachers’ movement is a public and political force today, but it wasn’t always that way. We can remember a time, not too long ago, when teachers were even more routinely dismissed, ignored, or discriminated against (imagine the backlash, and the political careers that would end, if that were done today). This should motivate stakeholders in the clean water cause and encourage them that this kind of communication success can be built, and similar advocacy gains achieved.





Mission-focused Messaging

Of all the messages built into its advocacy platform, the teachers' movement is especially potent in its "mission-focused" messaging: that is, the messaging that begins and ends at "the inequity"—or the injustice that fuels the mission or cause. It is here that the most persuasive messages break through into the public consciousness, where the tide of public opinion can often be turned and the machinery of government can be leveraged.

In describing the inequity for teachers, wording and style differ according to medium, but the fundamental elements remain the same:

Teachers perform a vital function. They teach our kids, and without child education, we would all suffer. We cannot thank teachers enough for the wonderful service they perform for all of us. And yet, teachers are not compensated well for what they do, and their sector/industry as a whole is underfunded.

One can easily spot the parallel inequity for the clean water cause by simply substituting a few words in the above statement:

Clean water professionals perform a vital function. They clean and deliver our water, and without water, we would all suffer. We cannot thank these water professionals enough for the wonderful service they perform for all of us. And yet, clean water professionals are not compensated well for what they do, and their sector as a whole is underfunded.

From this inequity, one can envision the elements of an advocacy communication strategy.

What We Do

The prominent focus of the message is the teachers' movement's most fundamental truth: movement advocates simply talk about the importance of "what they do." The inequity then becomes so self-evident that the call for action practically gives birth to itself.

An especially potent quality in the (inequity) message surrounding "what teachers do" is its visceral elements. These are elements that make emotional connections—beginning with "our kids"—and can thus influence the public on an emotional, passionate level. And in any movement, passion is key.

When describing the profession of teachers, advocates have many messages at their disposal. They could communicate (1) that teachers educate youngsters, helping them obtain better jobs when they're adults, (2) that teachers account for a large portion of the job market and thus have an outsized impact on the economy, or (3) that teachers keep our children safe while parents go to work. Each message would be equally accurate. However, I would argue that all things being equal, the third would be more likely to influence the general public and compel them to act, because it is more visceral in nature. This kind of messaging can be seen in the speeches and signs of countless grassroots demonstrations, where, among the many ways to describe the profession and mission of educators, the *most visceral* ones are often most repeated in media and in the public forum, moving the needle much more effectively than other types of talking points.

And the more this visceral messaging is borne out, the more the profession of teacher transcends the definition of a "job" to become something more. What teachers do is no longer just necessary, it's *noble* too. The public begins to realize (rightfully) that these professionals are passionate about educating, often sacrificing themselves to serve our families. Listen to any teachers' movement speech or rally address, and this is where the applause lines are. Read any of the picket signs and flyers, and this is where the bold letters lie. And read through the movement literature over time, and these are the messages that endure over decades.

Perhaps this is the kind of impact-messaging that the clean water cause needs to emphasize, distill, and strategically develop. As generally, the *underlying truth* of what water professionals do isn't immediately apparent, nor is it communicated well. How many times have we, as water professionals, explained "what we do," then had

to detail it some more, and then explained it *again*, before others—even fellow water professionals—finally stopped, considered, and realized that their very survival depends on how well we do our job?

Who We Are

Again, aligning with the movement's most fundamental truths, advocates simply talk about "who they are." And here again, the inequity is exposed on a strong, visceral level. Consider the second part of the mission-focused message:

We cannot thank teachers enough for the wonderful service they perform for all of us. And yet, teachers are not compensated well for what they do, and their sector/industry as a whole is underfunded.

These statements in various forms, often repeated for decades and supported by countless real-life stories, have become conventional wisdom. On an emotional level, one cannot even disagree without some measure of guilt. Teachers are people just like us, after all, performing a noble service for our communities. Admirable. They should be thanked and respected, as we would like to be thanked and respected were we to have that job. Once we've (rightfully) admired and empathized with them, we realize that teachers are underappreciated, and in many ways, disrespected—the fact that they are underpaid is merely a consequence of the real inequities here. In advocacy terms: *victory*.

From this, we can (and should) draw the parallel message elements for the clean water cause: Water professionals are *just like you*, the bluest of the blue-collar workers, shedding blood, sweat, and tears 24/7 to clean *our water* supply every day. They work *thanklessly, behind the scenes* to support our families, who will never even have to think about where their water

comes from or where it goes once it disappears down the drain. And the visceral aspect of “who they are” in this case? *Their toil and sweat equals our convenience, cleanliness, and health.* We cannot thank them enough.

Movements and Mrs. Kenworthy

Movements come and go, as do advocacy platforms. What gives one lasting power while another fizzles and fades? Many factors are at play, sure, but a compelling case can be made that effectiveness in mission-focused mass communications would be among the more significant reasons.

Through the decades, the teachers’ movement has been fortunate to have distilled a solid message for its mission, one that’s tied closely to its basic truths and has propelled it to become the influential force that it is today. Similarly, the clean water cause has no shortage of truth for its messaging. The elements of our mission’s message are right in front of us, just waiting to be distilled and used. Now if only we can find our own Mrs. Kenworthy. 💧

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It’s Monday morning. Mrs. Johnson is up before 4:30 am. It’s still dark when she feeds her kids and gets them ready for school. She’s running behind, but as a top Utility Systems Operator III, she’s had extra training over the weekend, and is ready for an emergency call. There’s a pipe breach somewhere on the other side of town, and she’ll have to get her hands extremely dirty to keep the water flowing. It will be tough. But for this week at least, her community will have enough.

