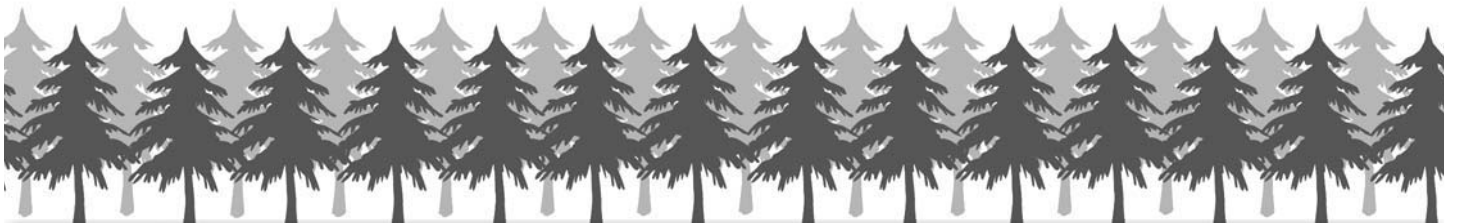

12. Research and Advocacy



Introduction

Research and advocacy go hand in hand. They are different of course, but they each rely on the other to be effective. Advocacy is defined in a number of ways: influencing outcomes that directly affect people's lives; changing "what is" into "what should be"; speaking up for others, or representing a sector, area of interest or a cause. We also talk about advocacy as promoting an idea, marketing a concept, or influencing social policy.

Research is a plan to collect data or a systematic process to gather information. Research can be informal (observation and common knowledge) or formal (involving a tool and focused methodology). The research results are often called raw data and need to be reviewed and assessed to understand what it means. This is called doing the analysis. Combined, the results and analysis help to form the proof or evidence needed to be effective in advocacy. All of it has to be based within the local context, meaning that it should be culturally and geographically relevant. The approaches used should consider how we gather, interpret and share data and what we do with it within our advocacy efforts.

Both research and advocacy should be clearly defined and well planned. It is easy to get carried away with research and want to look at everything, or in other cases, to look at nothing formally and just operate on hunches or our own interpretation. Setting a research agenda means establishing priorities for each year and discussing what information is needed, why it is required and how it will be gathered and used. With this information, it is easier to connect the research being done to the advocacy priorities. The reverse is also true, when there is an advocacy plan outlining priorities it is easier to determine what research would be useful to support the positions being taken. Ultimately, advocacy is about change and research helps us make the right changes for the right reasons.

How to Use Research and Advocacy

We use research in sport, culture and recreation to get an idea of the current situation, to show how effective or well liked programs are, to validate something, or to see what the short-term and what the long-term impact has been from our efforts. We use research to support advocacy or to help us lobby and influence decision-makers or policy. It can be used locally or in a larger arena such as provincial or federal governments. Without research it is difficult to show the needs that a special interest group might have or to make the case for additional funding or special considerations.

Once you have data it can be used as a benchmark (to show what the current reality is), then any additional research data is useful to indicate progress or regress. Research includes not just looking at our local environment, but others as well, and seeking information from others. Technology helps a great deal to do this quickly and easily, and it provides us with instant information at the touch of our fingers – sometimes more than we can possibly use.

Because of this reality – there is lots of information from all over, part of research is sorting out what is real, how much of what we learn is credible, how we can best apply the research, and what we have found elsewhere for our immediate situation.

12. Research and Advocacy

“Through the training we recently took, I have learned that research (doing your homework) is the best tool you have to be an effective advocate. First you need to know what is going on, then you need to know what it means, and then use the information to promote your cause.” – Greg Hatch, Northern Lights School Division #113

Taking a Stand

Advocacy is also about taking a stand – for something or against something. We can be for healthy living and against damaging behavior, for example. Or, the north can and does take a stand for itself – making it clear that how things are done “up north” is different than in urban areas or the south. Taking this type of position or “stand” is to ensure that programs or services that are developed in the south are not just assumed to be okay for the north. Developing approaches that are uniquely northern is done in the hopes that they will be more relevant and useful than those designed in and for the south. Because this might make them more costly, taking a stand with good research data to support it is better than simply saying “we want it done in and for the north” and nothing more.



The Northern Context

Northerners are very proud of who we are and what we do. Recently, there has been a change taking place that is all about promoting positive messages and images about life in the north – not always painting the picture by negative factors such as suicide rates, drug use and violence. This is a form of advocacy (called self-advocacy or community advocacy) and it is catching on across the north. Everyone involved in community work is starting to take a stand for the north and promote uniquely northern models for programs, to develop appropriate approaches for community involvement, and to help with the promotion of positive messages. The time is right and there is increased awareness of the importance of northern culture, family and community – all things that we northerners value and that sport, culture and recreation supports.

12. Research and Advocacy

What's Important to Know?

- ★ Advocacy and social messaging are key tools in sport, culture and recreation.
- ★ Research and advocacy are closely connected – either can be formal or informal.
- ★ Planning is needed so that research and advocacy can be linked to community needs and priorities and to help make the case or build up the cause.
- ★ Political advocacy and media relations require ongoing commitment as well as solid relationships and a significant level of trust.
- ★ Advocacy can take many forms but always results in change.
- ★ Sport, culture and recreation are full of potential for research and advocacy – they are highly valued in the north with lots of positive outcomes occurring.

Tips and Advice

1. Establish a research agenda linked to advocacy priorities.
2. Work on big picture advocacy items by keeping priorities visible everyday.
3. Use northern research and advocacy to improve southern programs.
4. Internet research provides helpful ideas and examples from elsewhere.
5. Advocacy requires good communication and a great deal of community support.
6. Lobbying requires skills and good relationships so take time to build both.
7. Use your relationship with the media to help support your cause all year round.



Story

Gordon Denny Community School implemented a unique community involvement and advocacy process they had learned about at a Community Development Workshop. Ideas were collected from the children, youth, school staff and community members on what they wanted to see for their school and/or community. A “clothesline” of wishes was hung up at the school. From there, community members of all ages, were part of setting priorities on what wishes needed to be acted upon first. These wishes were presented to appropriate groups in the community – such as the School Community Council and the Air Ronge Village Council. These organizations were asked to act on three wishes within the next year. The report continues to be utilized because it involved so many of the residents of the community.

“We are a community school and getting the community’s input into the new school is important. It will help to create a better and well used facility for our youth and for our community.” – Lynnette Merrimen, Churchill Community High School Facility Committee

“Research tells us that diabetes and obesity continues to be high and increasing in northern communities. We can use this information to advocate for health promotion and prevention initiatives, such as physical activity policies and programs.” – Dr. James Irvine, Medical Health Officer for the three northern health regions (Mamawetan Churchill River, Keewatin Yatthe and Athabasca)

Toolbox Connection

In the toolbox you will find the following tools related to this section:

- Advocacy Plan Template
- Tips for Meeting With Elected Officials
- Research Tips
- Sample Advocacy Letter
- Advocacy Examples