

Illinois Global Scholar: A Story of Teacher Advocacy for Student Transformation

Seth Brady and Randy Smith

This past September, not long after school started, NPR's Morning Edition aired an interview about a groundbreaking media literacy education law in Illinois. I (Seth) was listening in the car on my way to school. This first-in-the-nation policy requires all high school students to receive instruction in media literacy. Among other requirements, students must learn to analyze and evaluate media messages, distinguish fact from opinion, and reflect upon media consumption and production. A couple of minutes into the piece, host Rachel Martin asked the professor being interviewed "Are high school students responsive to this? I mean, do they get it?" The tone of the question seemed to tilt Martin's hand: she appeared skeptical. Sitting alone in my school's parking lot, I found myself answering her question out loud: "I know at least one high school student who gets it!"

The one high school student I *know* "gets it" is Braden Hajer. Braden was a student in my capstone class back in the days of lockdown and Zoom school. Two years before the NPR interview aired (almost to the day) Braden had posed a question that would lead him to draft the legislation now being discussed by two adult professionals (see page 61). Braden's work on the bill wasn't an accident or lucky happenstance. Braden's story was only possible because of another story of activism. In that story, a broad coalition driven by Illinois educators marshaled their time, resources, and collective wisdom to create the Illinois Global Scholar Certificate and the powerful model of



Seth Brady and Randy Smith, along with Kevin Angell (a student), speak with Senate Leader and IGS sponsor Kimberly Lightford after giving testimony at the Illinois State Capitol.

inquiry that led Braden and dozens of other students to take informed action to effect change.

Telling stories of citizen changemakers highlights the impact of ordinary people and reminds us of the power we hold as citizens in a democracy. Such stories also provide valuable instruction



Members of the Illinois Global Scholar Coalition meet to finalize the Illinois Global Scholar Capstone Performance Assessment.

on how to wield power for the common good. Given the numerous challenges teachers currently face, it is critical to become familiar with stories of teacher advocacy.

Background of the Illinois Global Scholar Certificate

The Illinois Global Scholar Certificate awards a seal of merit, on the state-sanctioned transcript, to students who demonstrate global competency. To earn this certificate, students must complete eight globally-focused courses, participate in globally-focused service learning, engage in global collaboration or dialogue, and complete a capstone project following the Illinois Global Scholar *Inquiry to Action* process. This model requires students to develop actionable questions addressing a specific issue, conduct research, connect and receive feedback from two on-the-ground experts, and then integrate that feedback into an artifact that is taken into action to effect change. School districts opt in to offer the certificate and, with the support

of the Illinois State Board of Education, determine which curricular and extracurricular activities will meet the four requirements. Illinois is unique among states offering global education credentials as it is the only state with a certificate created by, championed, and managed by volunteer educators. The educators who drove the certificate forward secured funding, assembled a broad coalition of stakeholders, drafted legislation, and mobilized statewide support for the certificate.

The story of Illinois Global Scholar (IGS) began in 2013 when a handful of educators (Seth Brady, Cindy Oberle-Dahm, Jon Pazol, Hina Patel, and Mario Perez) completed *Teachers for Global Classrooms*, a fellowship offered by the U.S. Department of State. This year-long program equips K-12 teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to integrate a global perspective into all subject areas. After finishing the program and completing a field experience in one of several partner countries, teachers are given a mandate to infuse a global



Members of the Illinois Global Scholar Coalition score student work to establish the interrater reliability of the Illinois Global Scholar Capstone Performance Assessment.

perspective across the curriculum.

Successes and Obstacles

It was with this mandate that we (co-authors Seth Brady and Randy Smith) began to brainstorm about what a global education certificate might look like in our own school district. As this brainstorming expanded to include teachers in other school departments, we soon discovered widespread interest and support. Teachers in these departments, along with our assistant principal, formed a loose coalition, and soon we shared our vision with faculty at the other high school in our district. By the time we had created a draft for a district-level certificate, we had easily hosted more than two dozen meetings, including several at the district level. With one final meeting to go, we expected the certificate to be approved by the superintendent and then the school board. Instead, we received a polite “no thank you.”

Though difficult to accept initially, the school district’s answer made sense. Leadership liked the

idea of creating a certificate to recognize global competence and the potential impact the initiative might have for students, but had to weigh this interest against limited time, resources, and funding. District leaders were already grappling with several ongoing initiatives and didn’t want to take up bandwidth by adding one more. Despite the logic, the rejection was devastating and humbling. We had gathered together a coalition of educators who saw value in the certificate and were willing to expend *their* limited bandwidth to see the program come to fruition. Why couldn’t district leaders do the same?

Three weeks after our initial rejection from our school district, we were awarded three grants totaling over \$30,000 to gather together stakeholders to develop criteria for a state-level global education certificate in Illinois. The grants came from the U.S. Department of State/IREX; the European Union Center at the University of Illinois (a U.S. Department of Education Title VI Outreach Center); and the Longview Foundation, a private



Members of the Illinois Global Scholar Coalition and Dr. Lydia Kyei-Blankson (far left) at a meeting to assess the Capstone Performance Assessment for interrater reliability.

philanthropic organization committed to expanding global education opportunities across the country. These organizations provided much more than funding. They served as partners connecting us with people, answering our questions, and providing information about and connections with states that were developing programs similar to the one we envisioned.

Building a Coalition

The support of these institutions helped us build capacity and connected us to a national network of global educators. With no state-level global education network, we started with someone we knew: Dr. Darlene Ruscitti, Regional Superintendent of Schools for our county. While we only expected a half-hour meeting, Dr. Ruscitti enthusiastically embraced the idea and spent two hours explaining the demographic and geographic diversity of our state and the importance of gathering stakeholders that reflected this diversity. She insisted that the certificate should

be accessible to students and districts. She also mentioned a handful of organizations she felt would be interested in the certificate we were proposing. After school and occasionally during lunch hours, we began to contact these organizations and share our vision. After making several calls, we developed a specific approach. We began by describing IGS with a two-minute elevator pitch about the program, then requested advice, and finally inquired about who else we should connect with. We found that this approach honored the wisdom each person had to offer. The approach also invited people into our process as thought partners and allowed us to expand our network with very few cold calls.

After several months, we managed to engage several dozen educators, most of the Title VI Centers in our state, professors and others in higher education, business leaders, and non-profit organizations. These stakeholders helped us see value in the certificate we hadn't seen. Prior to making these connections we had seen the

certificate primarily as a means of forwarding curricular outcomes and providing rich experiences for students. After speaking with stakeholders we came to see the certificate as a means of preparing a global workforce, as a critical component of STEM education, as a means to bolster Illinois agriculture and agribusiness sectors, as a means of attracting foreign investment to our state, as an opportunity to build community and foster tolerance, and much more.

In addition to expanding the purpose and appeal of the certificate, coalition building also connected us with people such as Shawn Healy, Donna McCaw, and Mary O'Brian who had the expertise needed to help us with policy creation, workshop organization, and assessment.

Reaching Consensus

The people we engaged to help with policy, workshops and assessment were critical to harnessing the energy of the 50+ stakeholders who attended Illinois Global Scholar workshops. The goal of these workshops was to reach consensus on certificate requirements and begin the process of developing a robust assessment of global competency. Though these goals would be reached, the process took time and effort as questions related to equity, access, and rigor surfaced during workshop deliberations. Would the certificate require a minimum grade point average? Would schools that were less well-resourced be able to administer the certificate? Could four years of a world language be required? What were the criteria by which global courses would be determined?

As members of the coalition grappled with these questions, a set of core values began to emerge that came to inform decision making about the certificate. This consensus building didn't mean everyone present got everything they wanted. For example, prior to the workshops one of our most important partners, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) indicated that it would not support a certificate program that included a four-year world language requirement because less than half of the schools in Illinois offered a fourth-year course. Members of the Illinois Council of Teaching Foreign Languages strongly objected. They had hoped that the certificate would expand world language instruction in our state and were

disappointed with the state Board of Education's position.

On the assessment side, workshop attendees labored to articulate a shared vision of what a global scholar looks like, knows and can do. Once this vision was established, the team developed a set of tasks that would allow a student to demonstrate these characteristics, and routed state and national standards to these tasks. In the end, the workshops resulted in a set of certificate requirements as well as a draft of the capstone performance assessment. Though this assessment would be refined through several pilot studies, expert validation, interrater reliability measures, and the collective genius of several dozen more educators, the assembled coalition had reached consensus on certificate requirements and developed a shared vision of what students would need to do to be declared an Illinois Global Scholar.

Navigating the Legislative Process

After developing the requirements for a future certificate, a small team worked with the Illinois State Board of Education to draft a two-page bill. Though the legislative rules would eventually total over 40 pages, limiting the initial bill to two pages was strategic in that it narrowed the bill to its essential elements, allowing legislators to focus on the substance rather than the minutia of implementation.

With a draft bill created, the team decided to try to introduce the bill into both the Illinois Senate and the House of Representatives, allowing two opportunities for the bill to pass. Many legislators responded to our sponsorship requests with polite rejection. However, our experience of coalition building left us undeterred, and we quickly found legislators to sponsor a bill in each chamber of the Illinois General Assembly. With sponsors established, we mobilized our coalition and began to systematically seek the support of all of the legislators in our state. We made phone calls, sent emails, solicited and wrote institutional letters of support, and even met many legislators in person. To aid this effort, we created a well-designed one-page fact sheet that explained the value the certificate would have to different constituencies and interests as well as an FAQ sheet to respond

to legislator questions and pushback. Though we would continue to receive a few polite rejections, we slowly built up the number of sponsors and succeeded in gaining support for the bill from influential legislators on both sides of the aisle, including members of both party's leadership.

In preparation for committee hearings, we asked our coalition to create lists of stakeholders who would be willing to file witness slips and found students eager to give testimony. Once committee hearings were scheduled, we sent out encouraging emails with detailed instructions on how to file witness slips. We took students to the state capitol to testify and meet with legislators directly. When the bill passed, we had a total of 39 sponsors across both chambers and both political parties. In the end, of the 165 votes cast, 160 legislators voted for the bill, with only a handful of nays.

Implementation and Transformation

After the governor signed the bill, our school district, which had originally passed on our proposal, became the first district in the state to adopt the Illinois Global Scholar Certificate. In the course of two years, we had overcome several obstacles, built a broad coalition, reached consensus on requirements, and managed to move a bill through the Illinois Legislature. And once this was achieved, we ended where we began: with students. Students in our own school, some of whom played a role in the bill's success, enrolled in a capstone course intent on earning the certificate. Months before, the assessment group had unanimously agreed that the goal of the Illinois Global Scholar Capstone Assessment should be "transformation." I

remember privately thinking that this goal was much too ambitious for a single course. However, the collective genius of educators resulted in a powerful new performance task now referred to as the *Inquiry to Action Process*.

Students begin the *Inquiry to Action Process* by developing an actionable question addressing a global issue in a specific context. They then launch an investigation and conduct research that seeks to identify the wide range of factors that contribute to a given issue. Students then draft an artifact and then refine the artifacts in light of feedback from on-the-ground experts who students themselves must locate. Finally, students take these artifacts into action in domestic and global contexts to effect measurable change.

In the very first year the Illinois Global Scholar Certificate was available, one student created an inquiry question that sought to determine the best way to end a future Ebola outbreak. This question resulted in her coding a choose-your-own-adventure game in which the player is a Doctors Without Borders doctor experiencing an Ebola outbreak. Rooted in the student's research on Ebola, the player of the game has to make choices and experience the consequences of their choices. Having had this game reviewed by volunteers and Doctors Without Borders doctors in Sierra Leone, the game was deployed in classrooms in Sierra Leone, with a pre-test and post-test demonstrating that the playing of the game deepened understanding of Ebola and positively changed attitudes and risk behaviors related to Ebola. Another student, who just wanted "to do a project on fashion" ended up becoming engaged in the Bangladeshi labor movement and created

Braden's story

Braden's research into the history of misinformation resulted in his mission to do everything he could to help students navigate the new media environment he (and we) find ourselves in. After struggling with how to best effect change, he drafted a bill and then contacted Peter Adams from the News Literacy Project and Bill Adair, professor at Duke and founder of Politifact, and requested their feedback. Using their input, he made adjustments to his draft bill, and then contacted legislators who agreed to sponsor the bill. Next, Braden gave testimony to the Illinois General Assembly, convinced more legislators to sponsor the bill, and launched a campaign to get ordinary citizens to complete witness slips. In the end, the bill passed and Illinois became the first state to pass mandatory media literacy education. Though the NPR coverage made no mention of the efforts, the facts are clear: mandatory media literacy education would not exist in Illinois without the civic activism of a high school student. He certainly "gets it."

a Public Service Announcement in the Bangla language to help an NGO teach Bangladeshis that joining a labor movement is legal. Future students would go on to deploy disability education modules for Afghan teachers, develop an evaluative tool for international service trips, and create a high-level graphic novel to address suicide in Japan. In these examples and many others, the powerful inquiry process developed as part of Illinois Global Scholar Certificate transformed students into globally-engaged changemakers.

Lessons Learned

Though there are dozens more projects that could be highlighted, what we realized over time is that the process we were asking students to go through was more or less the same process we had gone through to create the certificate. We started with a question: How could global education opportunities be improved for Illinois students? We engaged in an investigative process to determine certificate requirements. We worked with a broad coalition of expert professionals and revised the certificate in light of their feedback. And we took action to effect change. As is the case with students who pursue the IGS certificate, our process came with many lessons learned that are valuable to educator-advocates:

1. Vision-Advice-Connection

When communicating with potential stakeholders, be sure to clearly express your vision, ask for their advice, and never forget to ask with whom else you might connect. This formula is a powerful way to engage people with your idea and coalition build. Asking for advice honors the expertise and experience of the person being asked and invites them to add to the vision expressed. This in turn helps build relationships and sets the stage to inquire about other people with similar interests.

2. Build a Broad Coalition

When considering advocacy, spend time building a broad coalition. Though this

takes time, the process of coalition building around a particular idea or policy can help vet and improve a proposed policy or idea. This not only builds buy-in within the coalition, it prepares coalition members to address future pushback or objections. Where legislation is concerned, members of a coalition can be called upon to contact legislators, file witness slips, or garner support.

3. Consider the district or state as a whole

How will a proposed piece of legislation help all of the stakeholders involved (students, educators, or schools) in your district or state? What burdens might the legislation place on citizens, students, educators or students in your district or state? To what extent does a policy lead to shared prosperity for all stakeholders?

4. Consider situating yourself as a peacebuilder

Social studies teachers often find themselves navigating a wide variety of student perspectives and are well aware of the fact that political labels rarely encapsulate the complexity of any individual person. Rather than assume that a particular issue will be embraced or rejected by one party or another, consider seeing yourself as a peacebuilder who seeks to understand the diverse needs and interests of each individual legislator and the constituents they serve.

5. Develop a communication strategy

Different stages of advocacy require different methods of communication and different media. Be ready with a one-minute, three-minute, and five-minute “elevator speech” and prepare a one-page information sheet that presents the idea or policy, addresses the most common concern or criticism, and explains how the policy will benefit various groups of people.

6. Access and equity are critical in education

Equitable access to educational programs is critical to success. As such, create policies and ideas that address barriers to participation.

Conclusion

Educators occupy a unique position in their communities. They stand at the intersection of local, state, and federal policy and are entrusted to prepare students to become active engaged citizens in their communities. Though equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to advocate may take teachers outside the traditional scope of their duties, educators have a responsibility to act for the common good and teach their students to do the same. Given the challenges that face our communities, nation, and world, becoming advocates for students and schools is perhaps the highest calling of both citizenship and the teaching profession. ■



Seth Brady is an award-winning educator from Naperville Central High School in Naperville, Illinois, where he has taught for the past 19 years. In addition to organizing the coalition of stakeholders to create a global education certificate for Illinois high school students, Seth serves as project director for Illinois Global Scholar. He is an author of the C3 Framework for Religious Studies and a strong advocate for religious literacy, restorative practice, and inquiry.



Randy Smith has been an educator at Naperville Central since 2002. His primary courses are AP Human Geography, AP US Government and Politics, and American Government. He is the Congressional Debate Team Head Coach and serves during the summer as a reader or table leader for the College Board in AP US Government. He loves the way in which his central role in creating the Illinois Global Scholar certificate brought about a dynamic fusion of his interests and passions, and yet more importantly, has presented unique opportunities for dynamic enrichment for students.



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