How To Be a Politically Astute Biologist

If you’ve now mastered the art of being a politically correct biologist (see “How To Be a Politically Correct Biologist” in the November-December, 1994 issue of The American Biology Teacher), you probably now find yourself saying things such as “Today we’re going to study blood circulation in ichthyo-Americans.” Although such proclamations will help ensure that you don’t offend anyone (including the ichthyo-Americans in your class), you still may not have all of the skills that you need to impress politically-powerful people such as legislators, principals and superintendents. To work effectively with those folks, you need to be politically correct as well as politically astute. That, in turn, means that you must know how to talk the talk of bureaucrats. To do that, you’ll need to know the buzzwords; effortlessly spitting out multisyllabic jawbreakers such as “educational prioritization assessment configuration” and “discrete multicomponent interrelationship analyses” in your talks can preempt—even prevent—thinking and guard against meaning (meaning, of course, is fatal to anyone seeking political influence). Moreover, those buzzwords will help convince people that you know what you’re talking about, even if you don’t. Nevertheless, you’ll need more if you want to babble with the big girls and boys.

Here are some “power phrases” that have appeared recently in speeches, reports and articles written by biology teachers and educational policy makers. To help you understand what these people mean, I’ve also included a short translation of each phrase. As you’ll see, ambiguity that sounds forthright is your best friend.

**Educational renewal**
You’re always in favor of educational renewal, especially when the renewal will increase your salary or buy some new gun detectors for your school. This pliant phrase, like Spanex®, is supple enough to fit any agenda. Best of all, it commits you to nothing. Renew your commitment to talking about educational renewal.

**Educational aberration**
Use this phrase to describe anything that you want to dismiss as a fluke. “The decline in students’ SAT scores over the past few decades is an educational aberration.”

**The promise of education in America**
America has always been big on promise; use this phrase when you want some Founding Fathers luster to rub off on you. This verbal lard is especially effective when you weave it into a tear-jerking story about Grandpa.

**Educational agenda**
You never have one; others always do. Push your own educational agenda by accusing others of pushing an educational agenda.

**Bar God from our classrooms**
This phrase is effective because it summons images of the Lord being sent home from school. Regardless of your motives, this is a good phrase to use when you’re forced to deal with “scientific creationism” goofballs.

**The best interests of our children**
Use this ready-made rationale for any and everything. For righteous breast-beating, this one can’t be beat.

**Bold educational initiative**
You can use this grown-up version of “Look, Ma, no hands!” to describe any educational idea you have, all the while advancing your own self-interest. Of course, any policy that cuts your salary or requires you to do more work is not a bold educational initiative; rather, it is a symptom of “the disease that is killing education in America.”

**The disease that is killing education in America**
This one makes you the Marcus Welby, M.D., of the classroom. Because just about everyone fears disease, you can use this phrase to justify anything. When portraying education as suffering from a disease, even stupid metaphors can be useful, no matter how irrelevant.

**Broady-minded educational initiative**
This phrase, like others, sounds good, but is itself so broad that it means nothing. Use it anytime and for anything.

**Educational labels**
If someone tags you with a negative label, Righteously proclaim that you will not stoop to his/her level—after all, you deplor labels. This, of course, does not prevent you from plastering the person with a pejorative label later. If all else fails, label your opponent a compulsive labeler.

**Educational ideologues**
A pejorative label to plaster on educators whose ideas about education differ from yours.

**At the crossroads of educational history**
No matter where you are, it’s always safe to proclaim that you’re at a “crossroads.”

**Called to educational greatness**
That’s us. After all, people who are not “called to educational greatness” are not destined for educational greatness. This pandering punch-line, no matter how delusional or overworked, works every time.

**We owe our students nothing less than the best**
No one can oppose this grandiose, one-size-fits-all way of sounding humble, especially if you can say it passionately with a trembling voice. You can beat this rhetorical boogie endlessly.

**A vision for education**
This phrase transforms you from a teacher to an optometrist. Regardless of your motives or eyesight, claim that you have “a vision for education.” People who don’t share your vision have been blinded by educational intolerance.

**Educational intolerance**
When you find someone’s views on
education to be intolerable, accuse the person of being intolerant.

the magic of American education
This nationalistic mouthful will make you Teacher Houdini.

educational melting pot
The rhetorical recipe for our schools. Don’t mention that those at the bottom of the pot are most likely to get burned.

no-nonsense education
Everyone knows that education is filled with all kinds of nonsense. However, don’t let that stop you from using this phrase when you’re around administrators who are easily swayed by meaningless verbiage.

objective standards for education
Your subjective standards for education.

our argument is not with the students
This is the #1-rated chant of teachers who put their greed ahead of the needs of their students. Some striking teachers are politically astute enough to link this phrase with claims that their students are “our most valuable resource” and “the hope of the future.” These teachers who abandon their students for picket lines also claim to be “professionals.”

reframing reform
Another cliché cliché cliché to get more money money money.

this program will help our students compete
America is the land of educational opportunity
You’re talking USA all the way. These simplistic slogans are especially useful when you want a raise.

simplistic educational slogans
These are slogans that contradict your in-depth educational slogans.

this will raise our educational standards
When political pressures force you to lower your educational standards, this piece of visionary hot air will convince some people that you are actually raising your educational standards.

provide an excellent education
The word “excellent” is an excellent happy-face sticker that can cover just about any self-serving motive.

expedient educational decisions
Decisions that will cut your salary. However, if you are the person making the expedient educational decisions, refer to the decisions as “acts of courage.”

educational acts of courage
Decisions that will increase your salary. Be sure to also refer to these decisions as the “tough choices” that “the public demands.”

fiscally irresponsible educational budget
The educational budget that you oppose.

fiscally responsible educational budget
The educational budget that you support.

policies that will fatally weaken our educational system
Policies that could make me look bad; could even prove that I’m an incompetent bozo.

empty feel-good educational rhetoric
A rhetorical put-down of competing educational rhetoric; presumably better than empty feel-bad rhetoric.

our schools can help all of our dreams come true
A quick trip to the educational Magic Kingdom. People who fall for this line have retirement plans based on buying lottery tickets.

this is a complex educational issue
Say this when you don’t have a clue.

costly educational regulations
Educational regulations that you oppose.

I care about education
If said with enough emotion, this humanizing platitude will help people think more highly of you, yet will commit you to nothing.

never forget the power of education
Never forget the rhetorical power of telling people to never forget the power of education.

educational propaganda
Educational propaganda other than your own.

the vast web of educational regulations
Uncle Sam as Spider Man. These are regulations (“educational red tape”) that you oppose. However, if those regulations help you get a raise, don’t call them regulations; instead, say that they are part of a “comprehensive plan” for “improving our schools,” “raising our standards,” “securing the future,” and “providing an excellent education for our students.”

our students are hungering for an educational awakening
Get out the revival tent. Teachers become God-sent maitre d’s.

mere educational rhetoric
Educational ideas that you dislike. To denounce these ideas, you’ll need to use appreciable rhetorical skills.

the wonderful taxpayers who support our schools
You’re always on their side. No matter what.

educational integrity
The standard description of qualities that teachers need, and which you just happen to have.

educational leadership
Of course, you have these qualities, too, whatever they are.

a New World Order for Education
A not-so-new way of renaming and perpetuating the same old stuff. Meet the new boss, just about the same as the old boss.

educational excellence
What all teachers say they want; what many prevent from happening. This rhetorical mantra is more warmed over than those string beans in the school cafeteria.

Although mastery of these clichés will help you become a politically astute teacher, do not let your principal, superintendent or dean know that you’ve read this editorial. Indeed, if you’re asked to comment on this editorial, vehemently deny having ever read it. If you’ve caught reading it, passionately denounce it as being despicably cynical. That may help you later use what you’ve learned here to justify a raise or money for field trips, microscopes, or gun detectors for your school. After all, if you don’t have a convincing argument for the money, you can ask for it anyway by astutely pointing out that you are “deeply committed to excellent education” and want to “move beyond the rhetoric” to “really improve our schools.” If that doesn’t work, you can always fall back on the fact that you “really, really care about education.”

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