

## Illinois TESOL\*BE participates in TESOL Advocacy Day 2009 *By Betsy Kubota, Past President*



On June 24, 2009, Betsy Kubota, Past President of IL TESOL\*BE, joined 22 other TESOL members representing 18 U.S. based affiliates in Washington, DC for TESOL Advocacy Day 2009. This event featured a day of issue briefings and workshops, capped by visits to Congressional offices on Capitol Hill. The goals of Advocacy Day were not only to lobby on key issues for TESOL, but also to provide an interactive learning experience for affiliate representatives on elements of advocacy. By the end of the day, TESOL members had visited the offices of more than 70 representatives and senators.

Responding to recent Congressional action, TESOL Advocacy Day 2009 was focused on adult ESL and the efforts to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). To maximize the impact of TESOL Advocacy Day, key members of Congress serving on the education and appropriations committees in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives were identified for meetings. This year, Betsy Kubota met with staff from the offices of **Senator Dick Durbin, Representative Judy Biggert (Hinsdale) and Representative Phil Hare (Rock Island)** to discuss adult ESL and the impact in Illinois.

To participate, each affiliate representative was required to complete several activities in preparation. For example, participants had to set up their own individual meetings with their Congressional representatives. To assist with this, TESOL provided directions and guidance, as well as the list of specific representatives and senators to contact. This proved to be challenging in and of itself, but after the faxes were sent and several calls were made, aides in the offices of the representatives were willing to meet.

Participants were also sent talking points and background information on WIA and Adult ESL so that they could begin to familiarize themselves with the issues in advance. To help make our Congressional meetings more effective, we were also encouraged to find examples of our own to illustrate the talking points. For example, a Chicago Tribune article about Adult ESL learners was useful for highlighting the difficulty students in Illinois have in getting into classes (“English Learners Face Dwindling Options, Antonio Olivo, Chicago Tribune, May 12, 2009).

TESOL Advocacy Day started with a welcome from **TESOL President Mark Algren**, who was also joined by President-Elect **Brock Brady**. The morning workshop was led by **John**

**Segota**, Director of Advocacy and Professional Relations, and was comprised of two briefings. The first briefing featured congressional staff from both the House and the Senate discussing the “view from the Capitol Hill” on WIA reauthorization and the key issues under debate. The second briefing featured representatives from the National Coalition for Literacy, the Center for Law and Social Policy, and the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education who discussed their activities and perspectives on the reauthorization.

Following these briefings, an interactive workshop was held on how to have an effective meeting with one’s congressional representative. This workshop was led by Ellen Fern and Krista Heckler of Washington Partners, LLC, TESOL’s legislative consultants. Participants were provided key information to prepare for their meetings and given the opportunity to role-play. The purpose of the briefings and the workshop was to help us practice and prepare for our meetings on Capitol Hill that afternoon. We learned that the meetings may last 15-30 minutes and how to personalize our points with our own experiences or local insight.

In the 90 degree heat, we made our way to the Hill and found our representatives’ offices. I met first with a staffer in Senator Dick Durbin’s office, and then found my way to the House offices of Congressmen Phil Hare (D-Rock Island) and Judy Biggert (R-Hinsdale). The aides were all attentive and interested, especially Kemi Jemilohun in Rep. Phil Hare’s office who commented on the obstacles adult learners face.

At the end of the day, the participants shared their experiences and what they learned over dinner. The energy level was high as we all the participants discussed what we had gained from our meetings. Overall, everyone agreed this event was a very positive experience for themselves and for the TESOL affiliates.

Additional information about TESOL Advocacy Day, including photographs and video of the interactive workshop, will be available on the TESOL web site at <http://www.tesol.org>. If you are interested in learning more about your Congressional representatives, and the legislative issues TESOL is tracking, go the TESOL U.S. Advocacy Action Center at <http://capwiz.com/tesol>.