**GATESOL participates in 2016 TESOL Advocacy & Policy Summit**

On June 19-21, 2016, **Kendra M. Castelow and Anthony Dahlen** joined approximately 75 other TESOL educators and members of TESOL International Association in Washington, D.C. for the 2016 TESOL Advocacy & Policy Summit. The program featured 2 full days of issue briefings and activities around education legislation and advocacy, followed by a day of visits to Congressional offices on Capitol Hill. With representatives from approximately 30 U.S. affiliates in attendance, the goals of the Summit were not only to learn more about federal policy issues impacting TESOL educators and English learners, but also to provide an interactive learning experience for participants on elements of advocacy. By the end of the event, TESOL members had visited the offices of over 100 Representatives and Senators.

To fully prepare for the Summit, participants needed to complete several important tasks before arriving in Washington, D.C. For example, participants needed to schedule meetings with their Congressional representatives. For many, this was a first. To assist with this, TESOL International Association provided directions, guidance, and a list of specific representatives and senators to contact. Additionally, TESOL International Association connected attendees with other participants from the same state to encourage collective advocacy. Garlfar Andrews was the participant from Georgia to join Kendra and Anthony during their sessions and visits to the Capitol. They visited the Members’ websites and selected the option to schedule a meeting. After doing so, they quickly received a reply, whether automatic or a personal e-mail from the Schedulers. Kendra, Anthony, and Garlfar promptly responded to the Schedulers’ e-mails and called to verify their appointments.The scheduling process was very easy and could have been a challenge if prompt replies did not occur. It was true what John Segota, Associate Executive Director for Public Policy and Professional Relations, and David Cutler, Policy and Communications Specialist, said about the approach to scheduling the appointments: Be persistent, and never give up.

Participants also received background information on key policy issues so that they could begin to familiarize themselves in advance. To help make their Congressional meetings more effective, participants were encouraged to find examples from their own programs to illustrate the talking points they would use in their meetings. Kendra printed out and provided the Staffers with a GATESOL brochure that outlined the organization’s mission, membership details, publications, and other benefits of being a part of the group. Garlfar shared his compiled data related to English Learners and typed up a handout for distribution. Kendra also included her GATESOL business card, and Garlfar included his own business card, so that the legislators would be able to contact them at a later date. These elements validated GATESOL’s presence and provided a static reminder of our work.

The Summit featured a keynote from Dr. Johan E. Uvin, Acting Assistant Secretary for Career, Technical, and Adult Education at the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, representatives from the Office for Civil Rights and the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) at the U.S. Department of Education, as well as the Student & Exchange Visitor Program at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, each presented updates from their offices. The Summit also included presentations from the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and author Dr. Diane Staehr Fenner presented information from her book, *Advocating for English Learners: A Guide for Educators*. They learned that, according to Dr. Uvin, our Acting Secretary of Education, John B. King, Jr., valued bilingualism and biliteracy. That was encouraging to hear! In addition, they listened to Sylvia Acevedo, Commissioner on the White House Initiative for Educational Excellence for Hispanics, and learned various ways to actively engage community partners in reaching English Learners and their families.

Following these briefings, the Summit shifted its focus to advocacy with preparations for meetings with members of Congress. Other than learning how to use the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro) railway system to get from Alexandria, Virginia, to Washington, D.C, Kendra, Anthony, and Garlfar learned many tips. One, they learned that they did not have to know all of the qualitative data that ever existed. Rather they realized that their stories about their experiences as ESOL educators and/or their English Learners would paint a good enough picture about the issues at hand. Anthony shared his own experiences as a naturalized and multilingual citizen who is working as an Intensive English Program (IEP) educator to reach his learners. Two, they learned that they would be able to provide TESOL with feedback and information that they might not necessarily have known. This way TESOL would follow up with the people and share any requested information. The meetings lasted, on average, 30 minutes, and the time truly flew by.

To maximize the impact of the Summit, key members of Congress serving on the education and appropriations committees in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives were identified for meetings. In addition, participants attending from the same state were teamed up so they could meet with the legislators in small groups. This year, GATESOL met with staff from the offices of Senator Johnny Isakson (more information to come), Senator David Perdue, and Congressman Austin Scott to discuss various issues: parents/families of lawful residents and children born here in the United States, absence of naturalization and citizenship classes, H.R. 2794 and need for civics education and ESOL classes, H.R. 4541 and financial support for educators of adult learners, and H.R. 4643 and grants for providers of family literacy services.

John Eunice, General Counsel for Senator David Perdue, met with Kendra, Anthony, and Garlfar. Kendra discussed Senator Perdue’s influential family connections in Middle Georgia and in the Houston County School District, the district where she is employed as an ESOL Teacher. Mr. Eunice also highlighted Senator Perdue’s unique background as an international businessman and how role compliments the work of GATESOL and TESOL International Association. This made the perfect segue for Kendra to extend an invitation to Senator Perdue, Mr. Eunice, and the office staff to her school and meet her students. Although Kendra was not able to have a face-to-face meeting on Tuesday, June 21st, with Senator David Perdue, his Deputy Scheduler, Isabelle Isakson, invited her to attend Senator Perdue’s Constituent Coffee on Wednesday, June 22nd. Kendra was honored to attend and enjoyed Krispy Kreme doughnuts and coffee with a small group of Senator Perdue's constituents.

Michael Black, Legislative Aide for Senator Johnny Isakson, met with Kendra, Anthony, and Garlfar. They shared their experiences and backgrounds as ESOL educators and advocates for their students. Mr. Black acknowledged the large size of Gwinnett County, and Anthony and Garlfar were able to elaborate on the contributions of their ESOL and multilingual populations. Also, Mr. Black discussed the controversy surrounding immigration and shared that some have varied opinions on the subject. Kendra presented the positive impact Georgia’s hospitality made on her when she moved from her birthplace of St. Louis, Missouri, to Georgia. She also mentioned that her Mother was born and raised in the Peach State and that Georgia became Kendra’s 2nd home. Kendra suggested that legislation and legislature take that same approach in embracing those families present in Georgia and equipping the American-born offspring. She extended that conversation to suggesting that Georgia support the establishment of addition IEP programs, naturalization and citizenship classes, and ESOL classes for English Learners. Mr. Black commended Kendra for her passion of being an advocate for English Learners and of loving her work. Kendra, Anthony, and Garlfar did invite Mr. Black, Senator Isakson, and the office staff to their schools.

Aubrey Neal, Legislative Assistant for Congressman Barry Loudermilk, agreed to meet with Anthony. Anthony, being a member of Global Initiatives Committee at Chattahoochee Technical College, asked for ways to engage Congressman Loudermilk and discussed opportunities to invite the Congressman to one of the Committee's meetings.

Mark Sanders, Legislative Correspondent for Congressman Austin Scott, agreed to meet with Kendra. She is Congressman Scott’s constituent, as she lives in his District, the Eighth District. Mr. Sanders and Kendra discussed illegal immigrant parents/families of lawful resident children/school-age children and opportunities to support and establish naturalization/citizenship classes that provide ESL instruction.  Also they contemplated various opportunities to connect education with community involvement. Kendra used her GATESOL Regional Meeting, which was held in Macon at the Tubman Museum on June 4, 2016, to describe such an opportunity to connect with cultural centers of learning. It was her pleasure to mention that Dr. Andy Ambrose, the Executive Director of The Tubman Museum, took time out of his Saturday morning to stop by, introduce himself to the group, and express interest in learning more about GATESOL.  In addition, Kendra and Mr. Sanders discussed various issues with educators using their own funds to purchase materials for their ESOL classrooms. She did invite Congressman Scott, Mr. Sanders, and the office staff to her school.

Garlfar Andrews visited the office of Congressman Rob Woodall. The Congressman and Garlfar discussed issues involving how ELLs are taught in Garlfar’s school. At the end of their meeting, Garlfar invited Congressman Woodall to visit Garlfar’s school, Rockbridge Elementary, and Mr. Woodall was very receptive to the offer.

On June 21, participants went to Capitol Hill to have meetings with members of Congress and staff. We had to leave over 1 hour before my 1st appointment to make sure I arrived on time. The office personnel were extremely hospitable. They were true to Georgia, as they had Georgia pecan snack packs and Coca-Cola beverages and water to cool me off from the heat. The offices were beautifully decorated and had plenty of seating to accommodate small groups. I observed that each office had its own character. Fireplaces and colorful artwork added to the comfortable atmosphere. The Staffers appreciated the “Leave Behind Folder” that TESOL provided. I appreciated that the staffers mentioned that August-October would be a time that my Senator and Congressman returns to their district and area and could accept my invitation to visit my classroom.

At the end of the day, the participants shared their experiences and what they learned over dinner. It was interesting to hear what other people experienced on their visit. What I loved about this whole event was that it gave me the tools to be an advocate. It also highlighted viable community partners that are interested in similar issues. The Embassy Suites was the perfect meeting location! It was directly across the street from the Metro Railway Station and the King Street trolley that provided free service up and down King Street to the Potomac and back. The meals were superb, and the sessions and networking opportunities were all that I did not know I needed to become a new and improved advocate. Overall, all of the participants agreed this event was a very positive experience for them and for TESOL International Association.

[Additional information about the 2016 TESOL Advocacy & Policy Summit is available online.](http://www.tesol.org/advance-the-field/advocacy-resources/tesol-advocacy-policy-summit)