

They Didn't Teach That in Medical School: Running for Office as a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

Avanti Bergquist, MD, MS, FAPA, DFAACAP, and Steve Bergquist, MIT

As a child psychiatrist, I could see some improvements in individual patients and families with whom I worked, but frustration with the overall system of mental health was leading to burn out. After my husband, Steve Bergquist, was elected to the Washington State House of Representatives, I met Frank Chopp, the Washington State Speaker of the House, who then recruited me for his mental health task force. As a new graduate from child and adolescent psychiatry fellowship, I was able to overcome my “imposter syndrome” and eventually realized I was qualified to participate in this task force. I started to see how influencing policy-making could create change in the system that had been the cause of frustration for me and most importantly, for my patients and families. As I learned about the impact of policy-making on patient care, and saw my husband create important change in the system, I looked for other ways I could create improvements. I began attending school board meetings to learn more about our school district and community, and contemplated running for a position. When a member unfortunately passed away in 2017, I was appointed to the Renton School Board, Director District 2, and subsequently elected to the position in November 2017 after running unopposed.

My husband's run for office included far more hurdles. He was in a crowded primary race for the open seat with 3 democrats and one republican. He raised only 10% of the overall money spent on the 5 candidates in the primary election,¹ yet he advanced to the general election with first place in the primary and eventually won the seat. As you will see, his campaign was a good example of the commitment and perseverance it takes to run for office.

A record number of candidates ran for Congress in 2018, and almost twice as many candidates had filed for office

in December 2017 as at the same time in 2015. This was the most candidates at that stage of the election season since the Federal Election Commission started keeping records in 1977.² In 2018, the largest number of scientists in modern history ran for political office.³ The midterm elections added 3 new physicians to Congress, but that still equals only 16 physicians in Congress (3 in the Senate and 13 in the House).⁴ There is no known record indicating how many physicians hold other state or local public offices, nor how many physician family members hold public office. Within the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), I am the only known member in a publicly elected position. In a 2013 survey conducted by the American Medical Association's Political Action Committee (AMPAC), physicians ranked third highest in terms of being viewed as honest and ethical, only behind nurses and pharmacists, whereas members of Congress were second from the bottom of the survey list.⁵ If physicians are viewed so well by the public, why are there so few of us in Congress? Maybe it is due to political advocacy and campaigning being so different from the scientific and analytical tenets that we learn in medical school?⁶ Physicians also may be civic-minded and have high regard for public roles, but this does not generally translate to action.⁷ However, children's mental health topics are in great need of strong advocacy work. If child and adolescent psychiatrists are not involved in this work, others with different or less experience will create the policies that affect our patients and ourselves.⁸ Can you think of any better way to effect positive change than by creating the positive policies yourself as an elected official? This article will use personal experiences and evidence-based techniques to guide other AACAP members to run for office. If nothing else, advocacy can help to decrease any physician burnout you may be feeling.⁹

As stated, I am a child and adolescent psychiatrist, and my husband, Rep. Steve Bergquist, is a high school social studies teacher and was also a small business owner. Neither of us had any public political experience prior to being elected. To get started, we attended the AMPAC Campaign School in 2012, a program to teach physicians and friends of medicine to run for political office. This intense program teaches the basics of campaigning and makes it clear that campaigning and a political career are a team effort. There are many programs available to teach the basics of becoming a candidate and running for office that are geared towards specific genders, minorities, and other specialized groups. As a physician and a physician spouse, the AMPAC program was invaluable because it teaches the value of physicians and friends of medicine in politics. Through hands on exercises, it taught us the importance of understanding your own background, what you would bring to a political office, and how to amplify those strengths to your voters. There was a focus on the importance of understanding your community and where you can draw support, including the need for and how to do fundraising. Participants learned how to effectively get their vision out through public speaking, and the importance of face-to-face conversation. There are many similar programs to prepare citizens to run for office, but the AMPAC program is the only known program geared specifically towards physicians.

After attending AMPAC Campaign School, Rep. Bergquist's plan to run was solidified, but how did he win? He knocked on 12,000 voter's doors *in person*. He was able to create a connection and have a conversation with more voters at their doors than any other candidate in the race. Up to that point, he had taught about 1,500 students, coached many adults and children in local sports, had connections through owning a small business, and knew numerous community members as a fourth-generation member of his family in the town. He knew that talking with voters would be more important in understanding the community's needs and not only getting him elected, but also better learning how to support the community if he was elected, rather than spending time on significant fundraising or money on media campaigns.¹⁰

I identified the importance of advocacy through my roles on the AACAP Advocacy Committee and as president of the Washington State AACAP Regional Organization. AACAP has been involved in advocacy and policy-making for some time, as evidenced by the talented Government Affairs staff. Over the last several years, AACAP has increased efforts to support our members in advocacy work on a national and state level, including the creation of the Advocacy Committee, revitalization of the Advocacy Liaison position and network, creation of a separate Political Action Committee (AACAP-PAC), and financial support of the AACAP Advocacy and Collaboration Grant. The AACAP-PAC supports candidates for Congress who advocate for child and adolescent psychiatry and children's mental health. There has been one known child psychiatrist in Congress who has now retired, so while the AACAP-PAC would likely support a child and adolescent psychiatrist to run for Congress, we have not had one run any time recently.

For AACAP members hoping to get into politics, some advice is to start by getting involved in any way that feels comfortable. It is important to begin by getting involved in the community that you hope to represent as an elected official. Perhaps start by joining a community organization that you find interesting, such as one that helps children. Get to know people in your community through these roles. Get involved in AACAP by starting with your AACAP regional organization. You may be surprised by how these small opportunities blossom organically into more opportunities to be involved and build a base of support for when running for office. Meet with your local community leaders and state legislators and learn from their experiences, as well as let them know of your political interest. This communication will help you learn of upcoming opportunities for open seats or positions that need a candidate, and keeping up relationships will be important for creating a base of support. Take a training such as the AMPAC Candidate or Campaign Schools to learn the basic nuts and bolts of running for political office. Specifically for physicians, the AMPAC study found the following factors important for physician candidate success: let voters know why you want to give up a successful medical career for politics, show voters

that you are honest and can get results for constituents, voters want someone to listen to them so showcase your psychiatrist listening talents, be able to relate to voters on a personal level and not just a physician-patient relationship, combat the negative stereotype of politicians by bringing some new ideas that appeal to your community members, be a multidimensional candidate where you emphasize other aspects of your life beyond medicine, and know that being an expert on healthcare is not enough for a physician candidate to be successful.⁵

Having gone through these processes to become elected officials, Rep. Bergquist and I can attest to feeling a much greater sense of efficacy on behalf of the constituents we serve. This has also led to resolution of any feelings of burnout, since we can now make larger systemic changes that improve people's lives. Running for public office fits directly with AACAP's mission to promote the healthy development of children, adolescents, and family along with meeting the professional needs of child and adolescent psychiatrists. Child and adolescent psychiatrists are eminently qualified to run for public office and make positive changes for their patients, their families, and colleagues. With only one child and adolescent psychiatrist currently in office, it is time for more to take up the call to run, or this voice will continue to be overshadowed by those with less expertise or training.

Take Home Summary

Scientists, including physicians, are getting more involved in running for public office. The authors share their experience as a child psychiatrist and a physician spouse in both getting elected to office, in an effort to shed light on how other physicians and friends of medicine may follow suit.

References

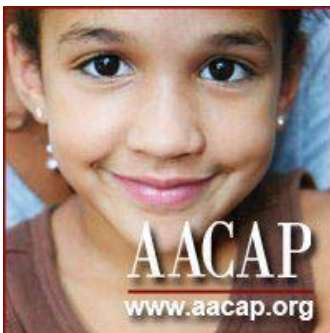
1. Ramsey B. Politics: money didn't win in Steve Bergquist's race. *Seattle Times*. http://old.seattletimes.com/html/edcetera/2019000874_politics_money_didnt_win_in_st.html. August 27, 2012.
2. Kane P. It's a gusher of candidates due to Trump resistance and frustration with Congress. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/its-a-gusher-of-candidates-due-to-trump-resistance-and-frustration-with-congress/2018/03/02/5b5f0784-1e3e-11e8-9de1-147dd2df3829_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e8d38672b17f. March 3, 2018.
3. Kaufman AC. The largest number of scientists in modern US history are running for office in 2018. *Huffington Post*. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/science-candidates_us_5a74fffde4b06ee97af2ae60. February 3, 2018. Updated February 5, 2018.
4. AOA Staff. Is there a doctor in the house? physician victories in the 2018 midterm elections. *The DO*. <https://thedo.osteopathic.org/2018/11/is-there-a-doctor-in-the-house-physician-victories-in-the-2018-midterm-elections/>. November 14, 2018.
5. Key Findings of Research Conducted in April & May 2013 on behalf of AMPAC's Physicians as Candidates Research Program. AMPAC. <http://www.ampaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Physicians-as-Candidates-Presentation.pdf>. September 2014.
6. Pittman D. Wanted: doctors in congress. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/06/14/wanted-doc-tors-in-congress-594972>. June 14, 2018.
7. Gruen RL, Campbell EG, Blumenthal D. Public roles of US physicians: community participation, political involvement, and collective advocacy. *JAMA*. 2006;296:2467-2475.
8. Ptakowski KK. Advocating for children and adolescents with mental illnesses. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*. 2010;19:131-138.
9. Coutinho AJ, Dakis KE. Incorporating advocacy training to decrease burnout. *Academic Medicine*. 2017;92:905.
10. Gerber AS, Green DP. The effects of canvassing, telephone calls, and direct mail on voter turnout: a field experiment. *American Political Science Review*. 2000;94(3):653-663.

About the Authors

Avanti Bergquist, MD, MS, FAPA, DFAACAP, is a child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist with the Eating Recovery Center in Bellevue, WA. She serves as Past-President of the Washington State AACAP Regional Organization, and as an elected director of the Renton School District Board of Directors.

Steve Bergquist, MIT, is a high school social studies teacher with the State of Washington Renton School District and is an elected member of the Washington State House of Representatives, representing the 11th District.

Disclosure: Representative Bergquist has received campaign contributions from biomedical organizations including: Washington State Dental PAC, Washington Optometric PAC, Washington Hospital PAC, Washington Medical PAC, PHRMA, Physicians Insurance, SEIU 775, Washington Health Care Association PAC, DOCPAC of Washington, SEIU Healthcare, SEIU Local #6, Cardinal Health Inc., Physician's Anesthesia Service, Delta Dental of Washington, Novartis. Dr. Bergquist reports no biomedical financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.



Follow @AACAP for the latest news on your membership and in child and adolescent psychiatry.



Follow @JAACAP for updates about newly published articles and all things #jaacap.