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Honoring a Driving Force in Education Advocacy – Jane West Retires from AACTE

By [AACTE](#)

In commemoration of her retirement, AACTE sat down with Jane West, Ph.D., former AACTE senior vice president and current senior consultant, for a candid interview about her life, career, and the change she has inspired within education and educator preparation.



Jane West's career illustrates her passion for education and her pursuit to ensure equitable access for all students. This commitment may be written into the very fabric of her DNA, as she was inspired early in her childhood through her mother's example. An incredible advocate in her own right, her mother was the youngest of 10 children from a small town in North Carolina and earned a master's degree from Columbia University in 1936. Her mother's principal belief that public education is an essential core aspect of our society had a profound impact on West. This belief sparked the beginning of her efforts in both advocacy and education.

Despite her impressive resume, West is the first to say that her most significant accomplishments and successes were not made by her alone. Advocacy is a team sport that requires many people to push the rock up that hill. West's greatest achievements in her

career are the many policy changes she has influenced and her work involved in building and expanding the advocacy capacity of educators.

“For decades, Jane has been an uncommonly knowledgeable, collegial, and energetic force doing the deep tissue work of policy research, formulation, implementation, and advocacy. Remarkably, diverse audiences have sought and benefitted from her unique insights,” says Leslie T. Fenwick, Ph.D., dean in residence, AACTE. “It’s certainly rare to have Congressional leaders, higher education and K-12 educators (especially, in special education), school/college of education deans, doctoral students, and national professional association directors and members seeking your guidance and advice as they negotiate understanding and doing federal and state education policy work. Jane has been that person!”

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the nation’s landmark civil rights law for disabled people, is what West recalls as a policy triumph and a personal point of pride. That it continues to stand unweakened 32 years later is a testament to the power of advocacy. She knows firsthand the need for such advocacy from history and her own personal experience in the field.

In 1972, West worked as a paraprofessional/teaching assistant in the Bronx with children who had lived in psychiatric hospitals and were transitioning back into public school. Inspired by her passion for poetry, she developed a curriculum for the students, which yielded phenomenal results. Shortly after she had finished the poetry lessons, the principal of the school announced a school-wide poetry contest. She was excited to share the children’s poems, so they could be entered into the contest. However, after barely glancing at the poems, the principal dismissed them, saying that “those students” could not possibly have written them. Such a bold rejection, clearly grounded in a firmly held and biased conviction, struck a chord with her. From that moment, she recalls, a fire was lit, and she was determined to ensure that every student received a fair shot. To this day, West still has those poems.

West has had numerous roles throughout her illustrious career, but one constant, common connection links them together: equity and advocacy. Whether leading advocacy efforts to enact policies that ensure equitable access to fully prepared teachers, collaborating with federal and state coalitions, teaching, or mentoring, her life’s work has increased people’s advocacy capacities and shown them how to be successful at it. In her words, “it’s a matter of developing the mindset and the skillset to make your voice heard at the policy-making table.” West believes that all educators are advocates at heart, and when passion turns to advocacy, we can all make tremendous differences in policy.

Matthew J. Wales, CAE, CMP, vice president, member services & events, AACTE shares, “I am thankful that, early in my career, I crossed paths with Jane. In fact, she was the person who took a chance and hired me at AACTE. Through her mentorship and guidance, I not only saw her create AACTE’s first Day on the Hill but was able to see the power of advocacy firsthand. The many Congressional visits she let me tag along on were an invaluable learning experience. Jane is truly someone whose vision and determination leaves a positive and profound impact upon the programs she pilots, the policies she champions, and the people she touches.”

From West's point of view, advocacy is the key to making significant change within our society. We only make significant change in our society through advocacy. When we remain within our comfort zones, progress is stalled, and change becomes impossible. "We are silent at our own peril," she says. "At this moment in time, silence is a luxury we cannot afford." For West, when she sees an inequity, it provokes a reaction and pushes her to do something about it. She believes all educators have that tipping point; it's just a matter of finding it and having the determination and know-how to act on it.

She emphasizes that everyone has a role to play, whether participating in town halls, attending PTA meetings, or contacting your local, state, and federal legislators. Find one thing you can do each week that will foster the change you wish to see, she advises. And remember, as West has reminded many of us over the years, "if you're not at the table, you are probably on the menu!"

"The beauty of Jane's unparalleled career in education is in its everlasting nature; Jane's living legacy will continue to be the scores of educators, advocates, and families that she has mentored, counseled, and encouraged to seek equity in all facets of education. In all things, Jane's approach has continued to be 'we are stronger together,'" stated Jacqueline Rodriguez, Ph.D., vice president, research, policy, & advocacy, AACTE. "Jane's dynamic influence on our field will have rippling effects for generations to come because she has made assurances, through her innate tenacity in forging partnerships and coalition building, to pass essential legislation and enact significant policy, that the human right to lifelong learning for every person is upheld."

West's hope for the future of educator preparation is an environment where all who prepare our nation's future educators continue to raise their voices to influence policy, but with even greater volume and solidarity. She believes the crisis we face at this moment, with a critical shortage of educators and the omnipresent lowering of standards to become a teacher, must be met head on. We must let our policy makers know that such actions are not only unacceptable, but also discriminatory. Marginalized students are disproportionately experiencing the impact of unprepared and under-prepared individuals serving — sometimes for years — as "teachers."

West is hopeful that policy and advocacy will increasingly become a part of educator preparation programs. She has worked over the years to develop a course on education policy and politics and has been heartened by the enthusiasm with which it is received. Participants finish the course inspired and ready to make their voices heard.

With over 40 years of experience in education policy and advocacy, West's passion for what she does is evident. In her work with AACTE alone, she reactivated a coalition of national, presidential higher education associations; inspired and influenced advocacy efforts within AACTE state chapters; and created AACTE's Day on the Hill (a critical component to Washington Week since its inception), just to mention a few accomplishments.

West is currently finishing a book on what she calls "the Four P's." This is a framework she created for doctoral students taking her course to enable them to unpack the complex and often obscure world of policy making in Washington. She hopes it can be useful in developing advocacy strategies and conducting policy analysis. West is committed to

passing on all she has learned in her decades of policy and advocacy work so that, in her words, “our public education system is affirmed as the foundation of our democracy that it is meant to be.”

AACTE President and Chief Executive Officer Lynn M. Gangone, Ed.D., shared, “Going forward, we will all remain beneficiaries of Jane’s knowledge, understandings, and advocacy through her forthcoming book about ‘the Four P’s’ of policy advocacy. Jane’s book will provide a valuable toolkit for planning and engaging advocacy work, the latter being the hallmark of her career. I shall never forget Jane sharing the story of her early days teaching special education children. It was during that time that her advocacy muscles were groomed. She was determined that her students would get the needed resources, support and acknowledgement they deserved. She never abandoned that palpable determination to ensure that all children have access to high quality educators and schools. Jane’s living legacy to us is the example of her abiding moral commitment and insistence that our nation do right by its children — all children.”