

Effective Advocacy for Your School

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The Basics

To be an effective advocate for your school, you should:

- Build relationships with lawmakers
- Reach out to the local press
- Cultivate contacts with key leaders in the community
- Follow up with contacts to maintain your relationship

Building Relationships with Lawmakers

- Lawmakers are often very responsive to constituents they know and see as community leaders.
- Instead of speaking to your local lawmakers only when an issue is facing the legislature, you should reach out to them periodically.
 - Attend local events and speak to lawmakers to ensure they see you are active in your community.
 - Send letters to their office to congratulate them when they receive a legislative award or pass a bill you agree with.
 - Reach out on a regular basis to apprise them of issues important to you.

Reaching Out to Local Press

- Many times, local press contacts are more amenable to publishing letters to the editor or opinion pieces if they know you and have faith that you are not just passing along a form letter.
 - Do not submit form letters to the press. They harm your credibility.
 - Instead, if someone asks you to submit a letter that has been sent to others, make sure you change it to make it reflect your writing style.
- You should make an effort to reach out periodically to local reporters or editors to discuss education and build a relationship with them.

Cultivate Local Contacts

- On some fast-moving issues, it will be helpful to have a broad base of community members who can quickly reach out to legislators when urgent attention is needed.
- You should work to cultivate contacts with like-minded community members, including individuals outside of the education industry.
- Keep contact information in a database (Excel file, mailing list, etc.) for use in situations that require quick action.
- When lawmakers see that many of their constituents are concerned about an issue, they are more likely to pay attention.

Follow Up to Maintain Relationships

- If lawmakers, press contacts, or community members feel you are only coming to them when you need something, they will be less likely to continue helping.
- Thank community members when they help you on an issue, and thank lawmakers when they vote the right way on an issue you have spoken to them about. This will help encourage them to continue working with you.
- Keep in touch with the contacts you cultivate, encouraging them to stay involved.

The Importance of Messaging

- Strong, unified messaging is very important to policy advocacy.
 - Lawmakers see inconsistent messaging as a sign that stakeholders have failed to put together a cohesive policy agenda.
 - Opponents see inconsistency as an opportunity to create confusion.
 - Fellow stakeholders from other groups can see inconsistency as a sign that you intend to diverge from the group, making them less likely to keep working with you.

Messaging

- When speaking to lawmakers, the press, and community members about a policy priority, it is important to stick to the issue at hand.
- Keeping your messaging focused will allow you to set the tone of the conversation, ultimately ensuring they echo your messaging and look at it from your point of view.

Policy Priorities: Not Just Funding Requests

- In the Capitol, many legislators feel that the education industry has put too much emphasis on funding, and as a result they are reluctant to engage stakeholders on issues for fear that it will become a funding conversation.
- To increase your efficacy in the Capitol, you must look beyond the budget to find other policy priorities.

Shaping Policy: Only Saying No is Ineffective

- Legislators are also reluctant to engage with groups they feel do not do enough to push forward policy.
- If you say no to policies repeatedly but do not put forward your own policy ideas, they will not take you seriously.
- To build credibility in the Capitol, you must show you are willing to work on policy proposals, not just stand against what has been proposed.

The Results of Effective Outreach: Going on the Offensive Instead of Playing Defense

- Once you build up your credibility with members of the legislature and demonstrate how much impact you can have in the Capitol, you will find your outreach efforts will become even more effective.
- You will be more able to initiate positive policy changes, rather than playing defense, and you will be able to build upon your successes.

Examples

- In 2009, Rep. Bill Deeken told the Columbia Tribune that the group pushing the legislature to change the way judges are selected in Missouri was able to encourage him to change his vote by directing people to call his office, noting “I got more calls telling me to vote for it than I did against it.”
- In 2013, grassroots outreach helped to change the tide on a measure relating to liquor franchises. The previous year, the legislature had passed a new franchise bill by a wide margin. Outreach helped to stall the 2013 bill encouraging several House members to change their votes and ultimately resulting in a Senate filibuster of the bill.