

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

In order to have a real impact on the policy decisions made on Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill, remember the golden rule—make a habit out of advocacy.

Effective advocacy for education is a year-round job. It's not enough to wait until there is a crisis in the district or funding for education programs is on the chopping block. To win in the advocacy game, you need to work throughout the year to develop and nurture relationships with your legislators and their staff. You may find it helpful to establish an advocacy policy for your school district that states explicitly your district's commitment to advocacy for education and follow that up with regular advocacy actions. These could include meeting with your legislators at their state house or district office, inviting your legislators to visit particular school programs or speak at back-to-school or other special events, and lobbying letters or phone calls to your legislators stating your position on specific education-related legislation.

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

Massachusetts Association of School Committees | 2022

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HAVING AN IMPACT ADVOCATING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

No one is closer to the people in American public policy than a school committee. You are a local elected official subject to public evaluation via the ballot box. Your constituents know how to reach you and make contact on a regular basis. Moreover, you are the elected advocates for children and for the next generation. Preparing them for college and careers, family responsibilities, and their role in a democracy is among the most important roles for public schools and responsibilities for the school committee and school personnel.

You also have a strong base of knowledge about what it will take to prepare children and support their families. As an elected board member, you also make dozens of difficult and challenging decisions about school policy, budget, collective bargaining, and the values of your city, town and region. With your constituents sitting right before you, or only a call or an e-mail away, you have one of the hardest jobs in American democracy. And everybody knows it.

CAN YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE AS AN ADVOCATE?

While changing the direction of public policy making is difficult, getting the attention of legislators is not. Because you are a locally elected official, legislators understand your position and respect it. In fact, 20% of the Massachusetts legislature served on a school committee. One hundred percent of them deal with issues about which they need you to inform them. Although flooding legislators' offices with canned messages, prompted e-mails, and phone calls with words that someone else has scripted have a limited impact, speaking directly to a legislator with a powerful and sincere message can make a huge difference. As someone who is truly on the front lines of education, you are in a position to explain with credibility the real-life impact of legislative decisions on schools and school children. In this role, you are also an invaluable source of information for legislators.

HOW CAN YOU ADVOCATE EFFECTIVELY?

Over the past several years, MASC staff and board leaders have met with legislators, members of Congress, and key state officials who make public policy. We ask them what it takes to be a persuasive advocate and how we might change the direction of public policy in areas where we have major concerns: abusive overregulation, charter school reform, adequate funding, relief from unfunded and partially funded mandates, and the impact of "big money" in driving the proliferation of accountability systems and testing, among other issues.

Here is what lawmakers in Boston and Washington have told us about what it takes to advocate effectively.

PREPARING FOR A SUCCESSFUL MEETING

- Invite your legislators to visit your schools. Plan a tour of one of your schools to showcase a successful program in action.
- Research your legislators' backgrounds, committee assignments and voting records on your issues.
- Brief is good. Make your point and don't waste time. And when you write, spend words as you would spend money.
- Set priorities. When everything is important, nothing is important.
- Never underestimate the power of the press. Not only does it help shape public opinion, it can be one of the most influential advocacy tools. Members of the legislature look to the media to "take a pulse" on what is important to their constituents. If you work effectively with the media, your view and your issues are likely to get positive press that will be seen not only by your legislative leaders but other members of your community.

Remember to say, "Thank you." So very few people actually thank elected officials for their time, energy, action our courage. School Committee members know that better than anyone. You can build a good bond with a legislator by recognizing that the constituents will not only be thinking, "What have you done for me lately?," but also, "What can you do for me next?"

If you are going into a meeting as a group, designate spokespersons who will present each point. It can be dangerous if everyone engages in a free-for-all, because the discussion gets misdirected and nothing gets done.

Be concise and focus on just a few issues or bills. Remember the BIG KISS principle, "Brief is Good; Keep is Short and Simple." You have about 30 seconds to convince the person with whom you're meeting that you are worth listening to. If you can't get their attention, they will tune you out. As a local official, you will recognize the skill of looking at someone, appearing to listen, and not be paying attention.

Ask directly for your legislator's support. If your legislator is supportive, ask him or her to encourage other members to support your position. If your legislator disagrees with you, hear him/her out politely, express respectful disappointment and rebut his/her argument if you have the facts to do so. Be courteous: you'll have other issues to take up in the future.

Whenever possible, speak from personal experience. Provide brief anecdotal evidence of how this issue affects your local school district.

Provide a concise one-page fact sheet or letter describing your position which can be left with the legislator as a reminder of the issues and your visit.

After the meeting, write a letter to thank your legislator for his or her time and reinforce your position.

• Know your legislators, personally. Legislators trust people they know. One of MASC's founding members, the late Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, said, "All politics is local." And former special educator and Speaker of the Vermont House of Representatives, Ralph Wright, a Somerville, MA native, wrote a book called, "All Politics is Personal." They were both right. Make it a point to know your local legislators by meeting with them regularly, face to face. Attend their local "office hours" and community meetings. Former House Speaker Tom Finneran praised advocates who could be "persistent without being obnoxious."

• Legislators will welcome good and accurate information, and it helps to have data sent to them before you meet. However, you must ensure that your data or other material are accurate, concise, and objective. Nothing is less effective than a screed that is loaded with assertions that are not backed up with real evidence. Respect the truth. Your credibility, like your word, is as good as it is consistent. When you are careless with the truth, or selectively economical with your facts, you damage your credibility.

• Watch for delaying tactics and be prepared to deal with them. In fact, you may recognize some of them because you might deploy them yourself. For example, when you come to an elected representative for help and you're told to "get me the information," or "I never heard that argument before," or "I've never seen that list before," (a regular response to local officials who present a roster of unfunded mandates). Be prepared to have that information, or that list with you.

• If you have a fellow advocate or a constituent who knows the legislators you want to visit, bring them along, or send them to speak with the member. Shore up lobbying allies from your community to demonstrate broad support.

• Like any organization that uses complex rules of order, practitioners recognize that the legislature works in mysterious ways. You might need to respect the pressure that a legislator receives from constituents on the other side of the argument. Or, you will need to understand that delays are a normal part of lawmaking. Once you know the process by which bills become law, you can determine when and how to most effectively influence the decisions made by your legislators.

• Recognize that there is a limit to state and federal revenue. Don't just ask for more money when you can also propose cost efficiencies, economies of scale, or policy changes that lower costs or have no cost implications.

• Respect and value the legislative staff. They are often asked to study and analyze information that will guide a legislator's vote. Equally as important is the trust that legislators put in their staff. Speaking to a research director, constituent services specialist, or even an intern can be more important than getting a few rushed minutes with the legislators they serve. Veterans also explain that disrespect to the staff is viewed as disrespect to the legislator. Moreover, staffers of today are often the legislators of tomorrow.

• Be visible. Let them see you at the State House. Let them read about your stances in the local media.

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