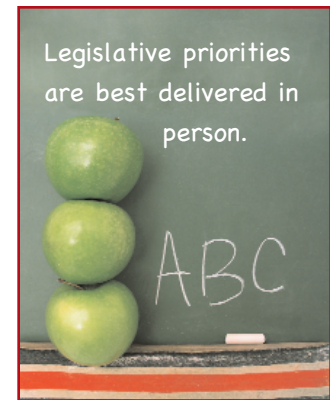


# A school leader's guide to POWERFUL EDUCATION ADVOCACY



importance of advocacy • effective lobbying strategies • meeting with your legislators • tips for effective media

---

## EDUCATION ADVOCACY

School Committee members have a unique role in public advocacy. You represent people in your community at the grassroots level. You speak for their children and understand their concerns. No one can argue their case with the credibility of an elected member of the school committee. That's why they elected you to the most difficult and challenging position in American government.

## CAN YOU REALLY HAVE AN IMPACT?

You can have a particularly forceful impact. Legislators acknowledge that as few as a half dozen callers can influence their votes on key issues. Even a single, knowledgeable person can have a significant impact. School committee members are among the more prominent local leaders. Your support on a bill, opinion on an issue, or role in a political campaign can make the difference between success and defeat. 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.

## WHY IS YOUR ADVOCACY SO IMPORTANT?

Your advocacy is critical because, as an education leader, you have firsthand understanding of what is needed to ensure the best education for public school children in Massachusetts. You have an important message to deliver to state and federal legislative leaders, the Administration, the media and your community. Moreover, you are an elected official with visibility. You have put yourself before the public as a leader. Your colleagues in government, your state legislators and members of Congress, understand your role and respect your position.

Legislators value clear, concise and informative communication from constituents. In particular, school leaders are in a good position to know what policies work and don't work in public schools. Summarized on the following pages are some proven means to help you communicate more effectively with your legislators.



Massachusetts Association of School Committees, Inc.

One McKinley Square, Boston, MA 02109

(617) 523-8454 (800) 392-6023 fax: (617) 742-4125 [www.masc.org](http://www.masc.org)

## HOW TO MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

MASC has asked lawmakers in Boston and Washington what it takes to advocate effectively. Here is what they've told us.

**Know your legislators.** 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." Make it a point to know your local legislators personally. Communicate with them regularly. Attend their local "office hours" and community meetings.

Also, take the time to assemble information about your legislators before you contact them on an issue. Many public policy makers have experiences that can relate to the issues you will raise. 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.

**Provide helpful and accurate information.** Legislators appreciate having timely, factual information that is reliably accurate and free of rhetoric. When you have information that is important or research that bolsters your point of view, share it with legislators and their staff.

**Communicate with the staff.** Legislative staff are an important part of the process. They review and analyze legislation, attend hearings and community meetings, and assist legislators in developing positions. Also, they 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.

**Respect and understand the legislative process.** Lawmaking is part of the political process. It takes time to hear everyone with a point of view, special interest, or area of expertise. Good laws can take years to make, or years to evolve from the first provision to the amended statute that suits your needs. Legislators are under constant pressure to appease several interests. School committee members, who respond to more single-issue constituents (parents) than anyone else should understand that.

**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.

**Brief is good.** Make your point and don't waste time. And when you write, spend words as you would spend money.

**Say thanks.** School committee members know how rarely people thank them for the difficult and controversial work they do. When your legislators deliver for you or supports your bills, make it a point to let them know that you're paying attention and that you're grateful.

## USING THE MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE YOUR MESSAGE

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. Below are some effective strategies for working with the media.

**Know the players.** Meet the reporters or education writers who cover your school committee and respect their role. Know the editors, too, because they write the editorials that shape public opinion. Cultivate these relationships.

**Stay local.** Your constituents read the daily or weekly local newspapers. So do your legislators. One well written article in your hometown paper may be worth ten in *The New York Times*.

**Keep it focused.** Address one issue at a time and do it consistently with a well planned timetable. If you write or call too often, you can lose your impact.

**A good article can have a long life.** Clip and send your good press to your legislators and other decision-makers.

**Don't forget your own media outlets and don't underestimate the role of cable television.**

Take advantage of school district newsletters, publications, and radio. Since many local systems repeat cable broadcasts, it has become an important information outlet.

**Just the facts.** Stick to what you know and never exaggerate. Remember, you can always get back to reporters after finding the right answer. You won't retain their trust if your information is reliably inaccurate.

**Don't just say it, show it.** A demonstration or real life testimonial goes a long way to illustrate your point.

**Build media relationships.** Make media relations a year-round function, not just when you have a pressing concern.

They say the legislature works in mysterious ways. However, there is a method to its madness. 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.

---

## HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW IN MASSACHUSETTS

### **1 Introduction of bill**

A member of the legislature introduces a new piece of legislation (which may include petitions filed by Massachusetts citizens or organizations).

A bill can be introduced in either the House of Representatives or the Senate, except that funding bills start in the House. A bill number is assigned (**S.I.**, for instance, for the first Senate bill introduced; or **H.50** for the fiftieth bill introduced in the House).

### **2 Committee consideration**

The bill is next assigned to the appropriate committee for consideration. That committee must hold a public hearing where interested parties can testify for and against the bill. The committee will then decide whether to report the bill out of committee as "ought to pass" or "ought not to pass." When adverse reports of committees are accepted by the branch in which such petitions originated, the matter is usually disposed of for the session.

### **3 First reading**

When a bill is reported out of committee it is forwarded to all members of the branch in which it was introduced. This is referred to as being in First Reading. The bill is then placed on the Orders of the Day for the succeeding legislative day without debate. Following this, the bill may be sent either to the respective branch's Ways and Means Committee or referred for a Second Reading.

### **4 Second Reading**

At this time the bill may come up for debate, after which one of the following actions may be taken: The bill can be: tabled; postponed; sent back to the original committee; amended; substituted by another bill; or referred to the next annual session.

### **5 Third Reading**

If none of the above actions is taken, the bill is referred to the Committee on Bills in the Third Reading and placed on the Orders of the Day for the next legislative day. The Committee then decides whether the bill shall be passed to be engrossed (incorporated into final written format). If the vote is negative, the bill is rejected; if affirmative, the bill is referred to the other branch, which follows the same legislative procedures. In some cases, a joint House/Senate sub-committee will rewrite the bill.

### **6 Signatures, by the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate**

These are required for any bill surviving the above procedures prior to its being sent to the Governor for final signature.

### **7 The bill becomes law or is vetoed**

Under the Constitution, the Governor has ten days, not including Sundays and legal holidays, to take action on the bill. If s/he signs a bill, it becomes law 90 days following the date of signing. (Laws containing an emergency preamble become effective immediately.) If the Governor takes no action within ten days, the bill becomes law without a signature, except when the legislature adjourns before the ten-day period has expired. Then if the Governor has not signed it, it does not become law (this is known as a pocket veto). If the Governor has objections, s/he may return the bill with a statement of objections in writing (a veto) to the branch in which it originated, where the bill is considered again. If two-thirds of the members present in that branch vote to pass the bill over the Governor's objections, it is sent to the other branch where it must also receive a two-thirds vote in order to become law.

## TIPS: effective lobbying

Research your legislators backgrounds, committee assignments and voting records on your issues.

Develop relationships with your legislators and their aides by making advocacy a year-round commitment.

Don't overdo your lobbying. Only write when you have something important to say.

Invite your legislators to visit your schools. Plan a tour of one or more schools to showcase successful programs in action.

Lobby with real life experience. It's your most persuasive tool.

Set priorities. When everything is important, nothing is important.

Shore up lobbying allies from your community to demonstrate broad support

Don't forget the media. Getting your message out to the press can influence both your legislators and public opinion.

Always be positive and courteous. In politics, there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies.

Everyone likes a pat on the back. Remember to thank your legislators for a job well done.

---

Hold a pre-meeting with everyone who will be attending the meeting with you to make sure all agree on the position to be presented. Decide in advance who will discuss which points so that your visit will run smoothly.

Be concise and focus on just a few issues or bills. Remember the BIG KISS principle, "Brief is Good; Keep is Short and Simple."

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.

## TIPS: successful meetings

---

### 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.