



# Public School Advocacy Toolkit



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This Toolkit will assist you to:

- Take action in your community
- Write and submit an opinion piece to your local newspaper
- Contact or meet with legislators and staff
- Plan a public event
- Use social media for advocacy

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## Sample Elevator Speech

Pennsylvania’s school funding system is broken because the state is not paying its fair share. Some kids just cannot get a good education.

Our state pays for a lower share of public education than 46 other states. That gap is leading to layoffs and overcrowded classrooms.

We don’t have enough teachers. Schools are offering fewer courses and using out-of-date books and technology. We’re all paying higher property taxes.

Harrisburg needs to step up with more dollars that are fairly distributed, so every child can get a good education -- no matter where they live.”

## **Sample Talking Points**

Research shows that education funding affects student achievement. So the spending gap between wealthy and poor school districts in Pennsylvania – the widest in the nation – has a very real impact on students' lives.

Pennsylvania's new fair funding formula begins to address this problem, but will not cure the student achievement gap alone. The state still does not invest enough funding to ensure that all students can meet academic standards, no matter their zip code.

- Pennsylvania ranks 46<sup>th</sup> in the country in its share of K-12 education funding. On average, states across the country cover 47% of school funding costs, but Pennsylvania's contribution to education funding is only 37%. [U.S. Census Bureau]
- Pennsylvania schools are overly dependent on local revenues for funding, which account for 56% of school funding. When the scale tilts toward local funding, those school districts with high property values and wealth can support their schools but less well-off districts cannot, no matter how high or often they hike property tax rates.

That means those very districts that have trouble raising revenues locally often have more students who have the greatest needs and who require more resources to meet academic standards.

All students deserve access to:

- enough teachers to keep class sizes down and make sure students have access to all the academic courses they need for today's world and enough instructional time to learn;
- quality, up-to-date textbooks, computer technology, lab equipment and other science resources; and
- other supports to help them learn, such as tutors, school counselors, English as a second language instructors, and libraries.

All that requires money. The state has taken an important step by enacting a fair funding formula that distributes state education dollars based on factors like

students' needs and the ability of school districts to generate their own share of revenues to run effective schools. But after years of an unfair and inadequate state funding system, the state also must provide more money through that new formula each year to Pennsylvania's schools. It's estimated that the state needs to increase annual funding for school by about \$3 billion over the next several years. The bottom line is that state lawmakers must make greater and sustainable investments in students through the new fair funding formula.

### **How to Write a Letter to the Editor and/or Op-Ed**

Every legislative office subscribes to all local newspapers in their districts so a letter to the editor or an op-ed will be read by staff and/or your lawmakers. Your neighbors and other allies are likely to read the letters or op-eds as well. These outlets, as well as their websites, create public awareness and can drive the public discussion.

#### **Tips for Writing a Letter:**

- Use your own words.
- Only send letters to your local newspaper.
- Letters are typically in response to a specific article that has been published.
- Most newspapers limit letters to 200 – 250 words. As a guide, consider the following breakdown:
  - Introduction (25-50 words)
  - Key message(s) (100 words)
  - Call to Action (50 words)
- Provide your name, home town and day-time contact information. The paper will contact you to confirm that you wrote the letter.
- Make sure you reference the article you are responding to in the first sentence or paragraph of your letter.

### **Tips for Writing an Op-Ed:**

- Op-eds are usually submitted by members of the community who are influencers (i.e. a school superintendent, member of a nonprofit organization, lawmaker) **BUT** parents, taxpayers - and students matter and can write op-eds as well.
- Follow your newspaper's submission guidelines, especially on the word count. Most publications limit op-eds to between 600-750 words
- The paper's editors are likely going to edit your hard work. Don't be offended, and offer to work with them to make it easier for them to publish your work.

### **Anatomy of an Op-Ed:**

It can be helpful to organize your op-ed into three specific parts: introduction, the main argument/case, and a conclusion that summarizes key points and includes a specific call to action.

#### **Introduction:**

Engage editor and ultimately readers with concise introduction of 2-3 paragraphs that explains:

- Topic you're addressing
- Why the larger community should care about this issue
- A transition or "nut" paragraph that summarizes your core messages

#### **The Body:**

- Use relevant research/data
- Include local examples, impacts, tie-ins to the data and research
- Bring in expert voices

## **The Conclusion:**

Two pieces:

- A paragraph that ties core argument together. Do not repeat all data points or research but provide overarching summary.
- A Call to Action.

## **Nuts and Bolts:**

- Provide your name and, if appropriate, your title. Provide e-mail address and cell phone so that the newspaper can confirm that you wrote and submitted the letter/op-ed.
- Some newspapers will ask the author to submit a head shot. Don't be bashful!
- Wait a day and follow up to make sure letter/op-ed has been received
- Follow all submission guidelines. Some outlets do not accept attachments and require that text be pasted into body of an e-mail. Other outlets provide a template on their websites for submissions.

Be prepared for a call from your local legislator or staffer. This is the good news: the lawmaker or a legislative staffer will read your letter and might want to discuss it with you. This is a great opportunity to make your case and to request a visit with the lawmaker and/or his or her staff.

Be prepared for a call from a reporter as well. This, too, is good news: reporters will call only to pursue a potential story and your letter/op-ed will be the starting point.

## **Contacting your Legislators or Their Staff**

Lawmakers and their staff are the most critical audience for any advocacy campaign. Ultimately, five parties drive all decisions regarding education policy and funding in Harrisburg: the governor and each of the four legislative caucuses. Any successful campaign must include sustained outreach to lawmakers in their districts and, when appropriate, visits to their Harrisburg offices. Lawmakers respond to their constituents. Lawmakers are willing to, at the very least, listen to

your concerns. Virtually every lawmaker relies on staff for routine matters – such as managing calls and correspondence – and for guidance on key issues. Do not be at all discouraged if you reach out to a House member or Senator and a staffer responds. You can call, write, or email lawmakers. You can request a meeting with your lawmakers.

**Tips for calling, writing a letter or sending an e-mail:**

- Use your own words. Form letters/e-mail are tallied up – but not necessarily read.
- Brevity matters. Lawmakers are inundated with correspondence so be concise.
- Include contact information, including cell phone, so staff can respond during work hours.

**Tips for a Legislative visit:**

When asking:

- Be specific about your issue: A discussion about broad policy questions/issues is not as compelling as an upcoming vote on a key bill.
- Be flexible on the timing: Education might be your most important issue, but they are besieged with demands from any number of stakeholders.
- If you're bringing allies, tell the scheduler how many people will be attending and, broadly, who will be there. (A meeting with three school superintendents is different than one with 10-12-14 parents and/or advocates.)

For the meeting:

- Be respectful: Tone matters, even if you and the lawmaker disagree.
- Do your homework: Know how your lawmaker has voted on key bills and where they stand on key issues.
- Tell your story: Use your own experiences or other local examples/data.

Afterward:

- Provide a leave-behind: Lawmakers will start a file if you give them a simple one-pager that outlines your key points.
- Make it clear that you want to keep the discussion going.
- Thank the lawmaker for their time and encourage them to reach out if they need any more information.

Finally, make a special point to thank the staffers for arranging the meeting. Assure staff that you will stay in touch and offer to serve as a resource for them if they have any questions.

### **Hosting a Community/Legislative Event**

Inviting lawmakers and their staff or community members to attend or participate in an event is a very effective way to engage and educate lawmakers and their staffers. Successful events require sound planning and strong participation by the host(s). An event with 25-30 parents, taxpayers, influencers, important stakeholders or others will generate traction and attention with lawmakers. Below are general guidelines and specific steps that must be taken to ensure a successful event.

#### ***Leading up to an Event***

- Designate an Event Coordinator/Moderator who is responsible for setting the agenda; identifying speakers and setting the ground rules for the event.
- Identify lawmakers from your area who should be invited and work directly with staff to pick the right time to ensure participation
- Develop and share all materials with speakers to ensure that all parties understand the goals. Materials include:
  - A detailed agenda
  - A Media Advisory, News Release and distribution plan
  - An invitation list for community leaders

Each event needs to have a coordinator who is responsible for making sure that all the speakers understand in advance the purpose of the event and their comments, the time they will have to speak, and the ground rules for Questions



and Answers. The coordinator can also be the official “timekeeper” to keep the event moving along or they can appoint someone for this responsibility. The coordinator should convene a call. All participants should be asked to arrive at least 30 minutes before the event is to start to make sure that everyone understands the goals and the agenda. Sometimes, participants must cancel at the last minute. Just be prepared to adjust the schedule and inform the participants and the audience that a speaker cannot make it. Here is a sample agenda:

Registration, Meet and Greet	8:30 a.m.
Event Begins with introductions and overview	9:00 a.m.
Statements from parents, teachers, school officials	9:10 a.m.
Statements by legislators/guests	9:30 a.m.
Q & A from the audience	10:00 a.m.
Closing comments and thank you	10:30 a.m.

### Sample Media Advisory for an Event

**(ORGANIZATION LOGO)**

#### **MEDIA ADVISORY**

CONTACT: **NAME, email address**  
**Phone number with area code**

**Educators, Parents and Lawmakers to Discuss Education Funding  
at Community Forum**

(March \_\_\_\_\_, 2019) – Educators, parents and lawmakers are inviting community members to attend a forum to discuss funding challenges confronting school officials in central PA starting at 8:30 a.m. on Thursday, March XXX, 2019 at the \_\_\_\_\_ High School in \_\_\_\_\_.

The Forum is being hosted by the \_\_\_\_\_ Intermediate Unit and the \_\_\_\_\_ Association. The panel discussion will feature remarks from teachers, administrators, parents and State Rep. \_\_\_\_\_ and State Sen. \_\_\_\_\_.

“Our goal is to provide residents with information about school funding in our region and at the state level,” said Joe Smith, Communications Director for \_\_\_\_\_. “We’re pleased that our lawmakers can be on hand to help provide their insights about the upcoming budget process. This event is open to the public, and we’re urging residents to attend and participate.”

Media coverage is welcome. For more information, please contact: Joe Smith, Communications Director at 555-555-5555.

### **Social Media Samples for an Event**

Social Media can be used to garner attention in advance of an event and it can be used effectively during an event to reach a much larger audience. (For More Tips on Using Social Media, See the Next Chapter).

### **Here are two Social Media Samples for an Event:**

#### **Twitter**

- Call2Action! Join us March 8 at \_\_\_\_\_ High School to get a heads up on education funding from your lawmakers. [CLICK HERE](#) for details.  
#goodschools

## **Facebook**

- Join us on Thursday, March 8 at \_\_\_\_\_ High School in \_\_\_\_\_ to ask your legislators about school funding challenges in the upcoming budget debate. (Infographic/invite pasted below text.)

## **Using Social Media**

Social media is a critical part of any successful outreach or advocacy campaign.

Advocates can use Social Media proactively to:

- Share news and information about upcoming events.
- Build larger and more closely-connected networks of allies and supporters.
- Build relationships with reporters, lawmakers and other important stakeholders.

There are other Social Media platforms out there (Instagram, Vine, among others) but Facebook and Twitter dominate. They are here to stay. Just consider:

- Facebook reports more than 1.3 billion daily users.
- Facebook delivers news: An August 2017 national survey by the Pew Research Center found that 67% of Americans report that they get at least some of their news on social media. Social media isn't just for the kids anymore: That same survey found that "... more than half (55%) of Americans ages 50 or older report getting news on social media sites."
- Twitter reports more than 330 million monthly users.
- Twitter is an important tool for reporters: Nearly three in four journalists (73.3 percent) claim to use social media – and Twitter specifically – to develop relationships with potential news sources, according to one study.

Every lawmaker has a Twitter feed and most lawmakers have a Facebook page. Staff manage some of these platforms for lawmakers but there is no question that lawmakers are well aware of their Social Media platforms and interactions with constituents. Many lawmakers follow reporters on Twitter so you can join those online conversations as well. There are several tools available for free that allow users to schedule Tweets and Facebook posts. You can also measure your impact

by simply tracking the number of followers, likes and shares you're receiving on Facebook, and the number of followers and retweets you are adding on Twitter.

### **Tips for Using Facebook:**

Posts should be short and take only a few seconds to read.

- Share posts from pages as well as news stories to get your friends interested in your issue.
- Photographs, infographics and short video clips will gain more attention, shares and likes. Text alone is far less engaging.
- Remember to ask friends to share your posts and “like” the pages you share.
- Facebook is driven by user stories so when posting news articles or other materials, try to add a personal note explaining why the post is important to you and your community.
- Make sure to monitor the comments and delete any that are offensive or rude.
- Posts that end in a question usually get the most comments, so ask away and especially ask for direct feedback to your latest post.

### **Tips for Using Twitter**

For newcomers, the [Twitter Help Center](#) is a great place to start. You can also find a Twitter tutorial at [YouTube](#).

Tips for Tweeting:

- Keep tweets short. Twitter allows up to 140 characters, so you don't have a choice, but less is more.
- Tweeting a photo, infographic or website link will generate more retweets and a stronger response.
- Try and use a **hashtag (#)** with every tweet. You can find the most popular hashtags by using Twitter's search function, which will show you related tweets.
- Retweeting is an excellent way to stay engaged and get more followers. Retweet news stories as often as possible.

- Tweeting Legislators helps get their attention as well as their followers.
- When tweeting, keep in mind the entire Twitter universe you will reach.
- Stick to policy and personal stories and stay away from partisan politics.

## Sampling of Statewide Information Resources on Education

### Education Associations

- PA Association of School Administrators, [www.pasa-net.org](http://www.pasa-net.org)
- PA Association of School Business Officials, [www.pasbo.org](http://www.pasbo.org)
- PA Principals Association, [www.paprincipals.org](http://www.paprincipals.org)
- PA School Boards Association, [www.psba.org](http://www.psba.org)
- PA Association of Rural and Small Schools, [www.parss.org](http://www.parss.org)
- PA Association of Intermediate Units, [www.paiu.org](http://www.paiu.org)

### Education Advocacy Groups and Coalitions

- Campaign for Fair Education Funding, [www.fairfundingpa.org](http://www.fairfundingpa.org)
- PA Partnerships for Children, [www.papartnerships.org](http://www.papartnerships.org)
- Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), [www.pccy.org](http://www.pccy.org)
- PSEA, [www.psea.org](http://www.psea.org)
- Education Law Center, [www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org)
- Education Voters, [www.educationvoterspa.org](http://www.educationvoterspa.org)

### Think Tanks and Research Institutions

- Research for Action, [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org)
- Temple Center on Regional Politics, <http://www.cla.temple.edu/corp>
- Keystone Research Center, [www.keystoneresearch.org](http://www.keystoneresearch.org)
- PA Budget and Policy Center, [www.pennpbc.org](http://www.pennpbc.org)

### Government

- PA Department of Education, <http://www.education.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx#tab-1>
- PA Senate Education Committee, <http://education.pasenategop.com/>
- PA House Education Committee, <http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/cteInfo/index.cfm?CteeBody=H&Code=12>

### Morning Emails

- Keystone State Education Coalition – best single resource for PA education articles; sign up for daily update emails, <http://keystonestateeducationcoalition.blogspot.com/>