

From California School Boards Association

Advocacy Tips

Taking Action

As the only locally elected officials chosen solely to represent the interests of children, school boards have a profound opportunity to influence state and federal education policies by speaking out on behalf of schools and children.

School boards play a critical role in building and maintaining support for our public schools – and in engaging the public in our schools. In terms of legislative advocacy, board members are uniquely qualified to serve as the link between children and state leaders because board members serve the same constituencies as their state legislators. By providing valuable information, insight, and the "truth" about public education, board members gain credibility with legislators and the public, and as a result, become an integral part of the legislative process.

One of the best ways to become more active and make a difference for children is to participate in the CSBA Legislative Action Network as a member of the Interactive Advocacy website or as a Governmental Relations Chair (GRC). The CSBA website features a new Interactive Advocacy section created to keep local board members well informed about breaking education issues and to encourage board members to use electronic advocacy options as quick and effective tools. Through the Interactive Advocacy component of the CSBA website, board members have access to a fully integrated grassroots communications program with easy to use legislative bill tracking, online Special Alert capability for all legislative districts, immediate Newsflash capabilities.

Joining our Legislative Action Network is free for all CSBA members. Board members interested in joining the Legislative Action Network are encouraged to visit our CSBA website at www.csba.org. We urge all CSBA members to supply us with their email address to facilitate quicker and more frequent information exchange.

Building community support for education

Some state and federal issues are of such fundamental importance to children that school board members need to expand their personal advocacy efforts in order to mobilize entire communities. By engaging local businesses, parents, seniors, service clubs, neighborhood groups, taxpayer groups, churches, law enforcement, local government, local associations, and others in your advocacy efforts, school boards can more forcefully impact education policies.

Education is a vital community interest. In order to better facilitate the participation of your communities in legislative advocacy efforts, CSBA encourages consideration of the following:

Focus on mobilizing broad-based advocacy support or opposition on key issues. Various groups and individuals will be more willing to get involved if you prioritize your issues

and only ask them to help on two or three of the most significant ones each legislative session – this also helps to sharpen the focus of your message.

Get the word out about important education issues. Board members can share important news about education in many ways, such as speaking to local groups, writing guest editorials, providing news and updates for news letters. The more you are able to keep people informed about education issues, the more they will come to understand the issues and feel comfortable contacting legislators.

Encourage local individuals to write or call legislators in support of your board's position. Encourage the people in your community to mention whether they are parents, local business owners, members of neighborhood task forces, seniors, etc., when they contact legislators. This reinforces the notion that education is a community interest that concerns all citizens.

Engage the local media. Legislators read their local newspapers. They care about what is being said on local radio and television shows. By developing positive relationships with reporters and sharing information about education, board members can heighten the community's awareness of critical issues and, in turn, have an influence on the development of state and federal education policies.

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND GROUPS TO ENGAGE IN SUPPORTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

School System:

Students

Teachers

Classified Staff

Administrators

District Staff

PTA

Parents

Retired Employees

Senior Citizens

Cities and Counties: Elected Officials

Management

Staff

Law Enforcement

Clubs and Organizations

Civic Groups

Churches and Temples

Businesses and Chambers of Commerce

Local Colleges, Universities, and Community Colleges

Media:

Editors / Editorial Boards

Television / Radio / Newspaper

Association Newsletter, Publications, and Trade Journals

Child Care Providers

Health Care Professionals

Concerned Citizens and Taxpayers

The many faces of advocacy

Legislative advocacy and mobilizing community support can be accomplished in variety of ways, such as:

Personal telephone calls.

Sending a FAX.

Writing a personal letter.

Sending an E-mail.

Sending a letter on behalf of your governing board.

Sending a copy of a resolution passed by your governing board.

Sending a telegram.

Sending a handwritten postcard.

Calling in to local radio talk shows.

Speaking on local cable television programs and radio shows.

Writing a letter to the editor of your local daily or weekly newspaper.

Meeting with local reporters and editors.

Forming broad-based local coalitions that include parents, local businesses, law enforcement, seniors, taxpayers, etc., and encouraging them to contact legislators on key education issues.

Asking friends, family, and supporters to write personal letters to legislators on behalf of critical issues – every letter and telephone call counts.

Inviting legislators to visit your schools or attend special school events. Even if they cannot always attend, they will appreciate the invitation.

Attending events sponsored by your legislator.

Sending copies of interesting news articles, information about successful programs in your schools or noteworthy educational studies to legislators.

Meeting with your legislator

Meeting with your legislators is one way of communicating with them. A personal visit may be made either at the Capitol office or at a legislator's district office. Several steps are outlined below that you may wish to follow in preparing to meet with your legislator.

Before the Visit

Meet with other board members, district staff and the public to discuss your ideas and be aware of community response and interest. Note opposing viewpoints and constituencies, and be prepared to respond to these concerns if raised by your legislators.

Call or write your legislator for an appointment. If you plan to see him/her in the Capitol office, call shortly before you leave to confirm the appointment. Occasionally, hearings or other meetings occur that demand their presence elsewhere at the time of your meeting.

Give your legislator an "issues packet" during your visit. (The Office of Governmental Relations will provide this packet during the Legislative Action Conference to the Governmental Relations Chair or the designated lead person for the meeting with your legislator.) The purpose of the packet is to provide a point of reference to focus discussion, and to reinforce some of the matters discussed after you have left.

You may wish to supplement this material with local information and facts that reinforce the CSBA issues being raised. For example, in the past, members of the Marin County School Boards Association were known for providing their legislative representatives with a packet that includes a brief narrative summary of the general concepts they wished to discuss at their meeting and objectives they sought to accomplish.

The narrative was followed by a detailed description of the financial status of their districts.

Besides a philosophical discussion of their positions, the Marin County School Boards Association includes specific data to support their points. Most importantly, they provide detailed information about their districts. Although legislators are often provided with information regarding the statewide effect of their decisions, they rarely have available information on the specific school districts they represent. If you provide that information, you will have a greater chance of influencing decisions.

The association also included articles which supported their positions. Even if your legislator has previously read the article, it reinforces that the press and the community are aware of the problem, and that is something your legislator should consider important and work with you to resolve.

Be sure to include names of contact people (and/or business cards) in your packet so the legislator or his/her staff can contact you for further information.

If you prepare such a packet before meeting with your legislators, your discussion is more likely to be focused on the issues you wish to discuss. The legislator will also see you as a valuable information source who may be relied upon in the future.

During the Visit

Have confidence in yourself. You, too, are an elected official and have local support. Do not let the fear of visiting a state legislator intimidate you. If you or your district staff have expert knowledge, share it with your representative. If you or a district staff person have a strong background on a subject (i.e. your business manager's understanding of your district's financial problems), share this background with your legislator. A conscientious legislator welcomes advice and counsel.

After a summary introduction, note your purpose and objective for the meeting. Be as concise as possible. Depending on the time you meet with the legislator, he/she may be on a limited time schedule and time may be of the essence.

Don't insist on a commitment before your legislator has considered all the facts. A legislator has various considerations, such as other constituencies, other provisions of the bill, future amendments, etc., to weigh before making a commitment. Also, do not be carried away by a friendly reception and interpret this reception as support for your position without having heard this support stated.

Writing to your legislator

Write your legislator as an individual board member, as well as from your board. You are an elected official and your information and opinions are respected by other elected officials.

Letters should be written on personal or business letterhead. If you do not have letterhead printed with your return address, be sure to include your return address on the letter. Envelopes get thrown away. Typed letters are not necessary if writing is legible, but they are desirable.

Letters to your legislators should be addressed as follows

The Honorable First and Last Name
California State Senate/Assembly
State Capitol Building, Room Number
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Senator/Assembly Member Last Name:

Limit your letter to one specific subject. Reference the bill number that you are writing about in a subject line or the first line of the letter. Correspondence received on a bill is filed by bill number. If you have not prominently identified the bill number, or your letter reference more than one subject, your letter could get lost.

Be succinct. In most cases, a one paragraph justification for your position is sufficient and desirable. Anything longer and your points could be lost in the crush of a heavy work load.

Your argument for your position should explain the facts as they exist in your school district and how the particular bill will impact your school district. Legislators' sources typically only provide information regarding the statewide impact of legislation. They will have no way of knowing how individual school districts will be affected by a particular bill if you do not tell them.

Your last paragraph should restate your position and ask the legislator for a specific action, such as "your support when AB 0000 is heard in Assembly Education on January 0." If no immediate action is required, then simply ask for "your support as AB 0000 moves through the legislative process."

If you have not been able to get your legislator to visit your programs and see firsthand the condition of your facilities, be creative – send pictures or a tape recording.

Be sure to thank your legislators if they have done something you think is right on a particular issue.

Some additional tips for effective legislative advocacy

Get to know local legislators and their staff. It helps to know local legislators on a first-name basis and to make sure they know you by name. Also, get to know legislative district office staff and understand the role, the importance and the power of legislative staff.

Get to know your legislator's interests. Some legislators have particular areas of interests and are especially appreciative when you can help provide them with information or data about these areas.

Become familiar with the legislative process, legislative calendar and composition of key committees. Understanding the political process will allow you to schedule activities so as to be most effective in influencing legislative decisions.

Be prepared for meetings with legislators. Make sure you understand the issues thoroughly, and are prepared to discuss issues and present facts. Also be prepared to respond to concerns raised.

Keep current on legislative issues. CSBA Legislative Action Alerts and publications are a good way to stay on top of legislation impacting education.

Tell the truth. Truth telling is crucial to making long-term relationships work successfully. Always try to answer a legislator's questions succinctly and in an honest and straightforward manner.

Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, but I will try to find out and get the information to you later." It is better to admit when you don't have an answer than to make it up and potentially give misinformation.

Share information. You can become a valuable resource to legislators if they know they can turn to you for a truthful answer or objective information about an issue. You can facilitate this process by occasionally providing legislators with news articles, reports or tidbits of information that you think they might be particularly interested in.

Show appreciation for the legislator's service, past votes or current position. Legislators, like everyone else, get tired of only hearing complaints. Let them know when you support their positions, too.

Invite legislators to visit schools. Invite them on-site to see exciting programs in the district's schools, as well as negative conditions. The best time to do this is September through December when the Legislature is generally out of session and legislators are in their district.

Find areas of common agreement. A good way to foster a positive relationship with a legislator is to identify a common concern or issue and develop a plan to work toward accomplishing it.

Don't allow a disagreement over a position to end in harsh words or personal remarks. Keep the visit professional. Never be abusive or threaten defeat in the next election.

Don't hold a grudge when legislators disagree with your district's position. The board needs to understand the reason for a legislator's position and continue to work with the legislator on the next issue. Legislators should be assessed based on consistent, long-term support for education issues.

[Note -- These legislative advocacy tips were taken from several sources, including CSBA materials, the National School Boards Association and Nancy M. LaCasse's book Impacting the Legislative Process, published by School Services of California, 1995.]