

From the Texas Association of School Boards

Issues and Advocacy

Communicating with Policymakers

Although the Capitol can be intimidating for those unfamiliar with the legislative process, school districts should keep in touch regularly with their lawmakers. This is more easily achieved if you communicate with your legislators during the interim in your shared home district and continue this process when your representatives go to Austin for a session.

Advocacy Strategy

Before you contact legislators, you need some basic information. Then you can plan an advocacy strategy:

1. Personal information. This could help you establish ties to your legislators. Where did each go to school? What do they do for a living? What about their families? Do their children attend your schools?
2. Committee assignments. What committees are your legislators on? This is especially important if they are on a committee that regularly deals with education issues, but it is very important to keep all legislators informed about education issues.
3. Legislative staff members. Get to know the legislative staff member who deals with education issues, and make sure he or she gets to know you by name. Staff members are paid to pass along information to their boss, the legislator.
4. Voting history. Find out how your legislators voted on earlier education issues. That will help you anticipate where they are likely to stand on upcoming issues and will help you prepare discussion.

Personal Visits

The most effective way to advocate for public schools is in face-to-face visits. One poll shows that the top two influences on how a legislator votes are communication from constituents (particularly face-to-face contact and insightful, thoughtful letters) and opinions expressed in the local media (such as letters to the editor, opinion editorials, and articles).

Most lawmakers have offices in their districts and keep regular office hours during which they are available to their constituents. In addition, legislators have offices in Austin; however, predicting a legislator's availability is difficult when the Legislature is in session. Nevertheless, if legislators know their constituents have traveled to the Capitol, frequently they will come off the floor of the Legislature, leave a committee hearing, or find another way to meet with them.

When you come to Austin, remember to visit both your senator and your representative. To maximize the effect of the visit:

Tell legislators if you are a constituent and/or voted for them. Tell them if you have any family, social, business, or political ties to them.

Let legislators know if you represent the board of trustees or if you are working with others on the issue being discussed.

Be clear about what action you want legislators to take. Identify the bill by name and number.

Be firm in discussing the issue with legislators, but don't try to force them into changing positions or committing themselves if they obviously don't want to.

Always be courteous. If you lose your temper when disagreeing, legislators may feel justified in branding you a crackpot and may disregard everything you say. Do not alienate them. You may need their help on other issues later.

Always accept the opportunity to meet with a legislative staff member if a legislator is unavailable. Legislators are not always as accessible as their legislative staff members are during the legislative session. If a legislator is unable to meet with you, take the opportunity to voice your opinion with the legislative staff member who handles education issues. Staff members communicate frequently with the legislator and usually relay the message(s) to the legislator as soon as that legislator is available.

Thank legislators for meeting with you and thank them again if they helped you with your issue or voted as you recommended.

Testifying

When a bill affecting TASB members is heard in a committee, it is important that the Association's interests be represented in testimony. A TASB member's testimony before a committee can be more important than a professional lobbyist's, but members must be just as well-prepared as the lobbyist and follow the same rules of conduct. Of course, Governmental Relations Division staff members will alert Association members when testimony is necessary and will help members prepare testimony when they represent TASB before a committee.

Tips

Tell legislators what they don't already know. Lawmakers usually know statewide significance of proposed legislation, but they may not understand how the law will affect specific school districts. Lawmakers want good evidence of what a bill will do to the people affected by it. Communications should be targeted on local impact and should be as specific as possible.

Provide copies of written testimony to all members of the committee, staff members, the news media, and other observers.

Avoid reading written testimony to members. Legislators often are unappreciative of those who read their testimony to them. You will increase your effectiveness if you provide copies of written testimony and summarize the key points.

Waive the opportunity to speak if several others have already said what you wanted to say, and distribute your written statement.

Keep your goal in mind and don't let legislators' questions get you off track.

Put key points in priority order so that if you don't get all the time you need, you'll at least have gotten across the main points.

Get the facts straight and attribute them. Giving credit to the source of the information makes you more credible and protects your credibility if the details turn out to be incorrect.

Keep testimony extraordinarily brief. Legislators often hear much boring, repetitious testimony, so make sure yours stands out. Be sincere. Be yourself. Don't become emotional or be too dramatic.

Try to keep good eye contact with the panel, and address comments to committee members.

Dress on the conservative side because your appearance may be as important to some legislators as what you say and how you say it.

Answer questions as honestly as you can. If you don't know the answer, say so or defer to a TASB staff member, who will accompany you to the committee meeting and who may have the information.

Always offer to get the answer or responsive information to the member or committee after the hearing.

Avoid a public confrontation, if you are asked a hostile question. Diffuse the hostility by remaining poised and unruffled. Even if you are confident the battle is lost before you begin, your testimony may gain respect for the Association or may educate committee members in ways that may not be apparent immediately. You also are proving that support or opposition exists and shouldn't be ignored.

Be yourself. Try to relax. Your influence will be greater if you speak from the heart.

Writing to Legislators

Because most school board members can't come to Austin regularly during a legislative session, it's important to keep in touch with your lawmakers in other ways. Personal, thoughtful, well-written letters have a significant impact on lawmakers, especially when the letters are from their constituents.

Here are the four most important things to remember when writing elected representatives:

1. Tell them you're a school board member.
2. Tell them the issue (when the Legislature is not in session) or the bill number and subject (when the Legislature is in session).
3. Explain the local impact.
4. Be clear about the action you want them to take (support the bill, oppose the bill, etc.).

More letter-writing tips:

[Properly address the legislator.](#)

Be timely. Write before an issue becomes big news, before the lawmaker takes a position. This gives the legislator time to reply. When writing about an imminent vote, make sure the letter gets there before the vote. Your insight won't be much help if the vote was yesterday.

Avoid form letters. Write your letter personally. Use your own words. Avoid slogans or phrases from form letters. If TASB provides sample language, be sure to adapt it to your own circumstances wherever possible.

Keep the letter short, no more than one side of a single page.

Begin by identifying the bill or issue you're writing about, and focus on only one bill or one issue per letter. You don't want to dilute the importance of the main point.

Explain the local impact of the bill. Personal experiences or the likely effect of proposed legislation on your school district is the best supporting evidence you can give. Be sure to include any relevant information about the school district.

Express your point of view and your rationale strongly. Explain why the legislator should support your position; but don't get personal, never threaten, and never be offensive. Don't mention Election Day.

Always provide a bill number.

Be specific about what action you want the lawmaker to take; tell him or her to vote for or against something.

Neatly type or write the letter, preferably on business or personal letterhead with a return address. Envelopes are discarded.

Be respectful and reasonable.

Ask the legislator for a response explaining his or her position on the issue. You are entitled to know how and why your elected representatives take a specific position.

If your legislator responds, write a follow up letter promptly. If you get a noncommittal response from the first letter, don't be surprised. Often legislators won't take a position until the last minute. In the follow-up letter, restate your position and request. Remind the legislator that you will continue to follow the issue, refute or agree with the legislator's position (if any), and thank him or her for writing.

When legislators vote the way you ask, write them a brief note to let them know you appreciate it. If you worked with a member of the staff, include his or her name. This could ensure the member sees the letter!

Knowing how to correctly address public officials is important when advocating. Here is a list of key state officials and correct forms of address for letters and personal contacts:

The Governor

When writing:

The Honorable (Full Name)

Governor of Texas

State Capitol

P.O. Box 12428

Austin, TX 78711-2428

Dear Governor (Last Name):

When speaking: "Governor (Last Name)"

The Lieutenant Governor

When writing:

The Honorable (Full Name)

Lieutenant Governor of Texas

P.O. Box 12068

Capitol Station
Austin, TX 78711-2068
Dear Governor (Last Name):
When speaking: "Governor (Last Name)"

The Speaker of the House

When writing:
The Honorable (Full Name)
Speaker of the House
Texas House of Representatives
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, TX 78768-2910
Dear (Mr. or Ms.) (Last Name) or Dear Speaker (Last Name):
When speaking: "(Mr. or Ms.) Speaker"

State Representative

When writing:
The Honorable (Full Name)
Texas House of Representatives
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, TX 78768-2910
Dear Representative (Last Name):
When speaking: "Representative (Last Name)"

State Senator

When writing:
The Honorable (Full Name)
State Senate
P.O. Box 12068
Capitol Station
Austin, TX 78711-2068
Dear Senator (Last Name):
When speaking: "Senator (Last Name)"

United States Representative

When writing:
The Honorable (Full Name)
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515
Dear Representative (Last Name):
When speaking: "Representative (Last Name)"

United States Senator

When writing:

The Honorable (Full Name)

U.S. Senate

Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator (Last Name):

When speaking: "Senator (Last Name)"

The President

When writing:

The President

The White House

Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear (Mr. or Ms.) President:

When speaking: "(Mr. or Ms.) President"

E-mail

Although all members of the Texas Legislature can be reached by e-mail, they may not check it regularly. The e-mail address for Senators is firstname.lastname@senate.state.tx.us; for Representatives, the e-mail address is firstname.lastname@house.state.tx.us.

Fax

The fax number for all senators in Austin is 512-463-0326. The fax number for all representatives in Austin is 512-463-5896. Because of the limited number of fax machines in the Texas House and Senate, there is a good chance messages sent using this technology will get tied up, misrouted, or lost. It may be best to use other, more dependable, communications tools.

Sample Letter to Your Legislator

(On school district or personal letterhead)

The Honorable Melissa Model

State Senate

P.O. Box 12068-Capitol Station

Austin, Texas 78711

Dear Senator Model:

I am a school board member from Everydistrict ISD. On behalf of my district, I urge you to support Senate Bill 386, which would significantly increase transportation funding for my district.

Providing transportation for our 6,890 students has been a growing expense in EISD. (Insert specific local examples and information.)

Senate Bill 386 would enable this district to avoid increasing our tax rate significantly.

Thank you for your leadership in support of public education. Please respond to let me know your position on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Michael B. Member
President, Board of Trustees
Everydistrict Independent School District
512-000-0000
Other Methods

Phone calls

To call Texas legislators toll free, superintendents and board members can use the TASB Governmental Relations Hot Line, 800-580-4885. To be connected to any office in the U.S. House or Senate, call 202-224-3121.

Include the same information in a phone call that you would write in a letter and be just as brief. If you can't get through to the lawmaker, speak to an aide. Identify yourself by name, school district, and town. Mention the bill number, if you're calling about a specific piece of proposed legislation. Thank the legislator or staff member for taking the time to hear your position.

Telegrams

If time is short, sending a telegram may be appropriate. Identify yourself, the bill, and the way you want the legislator to vote.

Practical Communications Tips

To communicate effectively with legislators, certain guidelines apply no matter where you meet.

Do these:

Identify yourself. Make sure the legislator understands who you are and which school district you represent.

Be brief. Get to the point quickly, and be specific.

Know what you're talking about. Explain the facts, and understand the opposition's point of view.

Use a local angle. Explaining how a bill will positively or negatively affect the local school district can be very persuasive. Remember that you're not only the legislator's constituent, you're also a fellow elected official.

Show respect. Be positive. Remember to compliment the legislator's successes, and thank him or her. Although you are both elected officials, some legislators may follow an unspoken sense of hierarchy between local and state representatives, statewide officials, and federal elected officers.

Communicate often. Be friendly. Keep in touch with legislators year-round, not just during the legislative session when you want something. Invite your elected representatives to attend school board meetings, special events, workshops, and other events.

Get to know the legislative staff. It's important to become acquainted with the staff member who handles public education issues. A lawmaker's aide can be a big help in getting access to the representative and support for an issue.

Recognize effort. Thank legislators in writing when they vote as you asked. Let lawmakers know their support on your district's behalf is appreciated.

Thank legislators for meeting with you and for their support or consideration, even if they are against you. You may need their vote in the future on another matter.

Consider compromise. Stake out your position, but if a legislator makes a reasonable request or offers an alternative to the position, take the compromise into consideration.

Choose battles wisely. Decide from the start if an issue is important enough to risk ruining a personal relationship with a legislator or whether you would rather keep the relationship long-term and let the issue go.

Notify the legislator of a deadline. When writing lawmakers, tell them where the bill you're writing about is in the process and when action is scheduled. Give legislators all the information you can to make it easier for them to support your position.

Be sensitive to partisan politics, but always try to come across as nonpartisan.

Use correct forms of addresses.

Type your fact sheets, letters, and testimony. Date them. Be sure they include how you can be reached.

Establish a reputation for reliability and credibility.

Be reasonable, and realize that everyone thinks his or her issue is the most important one being considered.

Know other issues or problems the legislator is working on, and help him or her when you can.

Offer to be a resource for specific information related to the district.

Look for friends in unusual places. In politics, a friend—Republican, Democrat, liberal, or conservative—works with you on a specific issue even if he or she opposes you on every other issue.

Don't do these:

Don't be rude. Threats, rudeness, or other inappropriate behavior will not help your cause.

Don't be bullied. Don't let yourself be intimidated by legislators' authority or status. But recognize and respect their responsibilities.

Don't underestimate legislators. With rare exceptions, they are honest and intelligent and want to do the right thing.

Don't distort the facts. Present your position honestly and thoughtfully. If you don't know the answer to a legislator's question, say so. Then find the information and call back as soon as possible.

Don't assume the legislator or staff member has read or remembers something you sent. Lawmakers and their staffs are inundated with volumes of information. So, if you have something you want read, make it brief. It's also a good idea to give copies to the legislator's aide, who will probably be the one who reviews the submission.

Don't break a promise. If you tell the legislator you will get information or that you will do something in exchange for support, follow through.

Don't change your position. If the legislator has publicly committed to a position you encouraged, don't change your mind about it later, unless the bill was significantly amended or local circumstances have changed. Let your legislator know how the bill has changed and why your position has modified. Recommend he or she does the same.

Don't give inaccurate information.

Don't make moral judgments based on a vote or an issue.

Don't begin by saying, "As a citizen and taxpayer...."

Don't say, "I hope this gets by your secretary...."

Don't send form letters.

Don't write members of the House when the vote is in the Senate, and vice versa.

Don't ignore your legislator, and then contact one from another district for help with your issue.

Don't complain publicly or privately about your legislator or a member of his or her staff.

Don't hold grudges or give up.

Don't interrupt legislators when they are obviously busy.

Don't cover more than one subject in a contact.

Don't write a letter longer than one page.

Don't press for an answer on your first visit.

Don't blame legislators for all the things that go wrong in government.

Don't be offended if he or she forgets your name or who you are, even if it is just five minutes after your visit.

Don't assume that education is at the top of the legislator's priority list.

Don't cut anyone off from contact. Don't let a legislator consider you an enemy because you disagree. Today's adversary could be tomorrow's ally.