

Communication Tools for Advocacy

Now that you have your basic background information and arguments in hand and know who your audience is, it's time to decide how you are going to communicate to your elected officials. Remember that the most appropriate strategy may change, depending on the timing of the communication: a general rule of thumb is that *the shorter the time frame the more acceptable less formal communications become*.

It is also important to remember that in all communications with elected officials and their staff, be sure to introduce yourself, provide affiliation information, and provide a mailing address so that your officials can respond to you. Keep track of the communication you do. Copies of letters, notes of the various meetings and conversations help advocates know what they're doing and with whom they have worked.

1. Writing a Constituent Letter

Without question, letters are the most effective form of communication with elected officials. Letters create a sense of seriousness, due in part to the time they take to write, that cannot be captured in emails. Letters are important whether you are communicating with a principal, the state board, or with your senator. Association or business letterhead helps lend a visual distinctiveness and credibility to your concern. When writing to your representative or senator it is well to note that because of new security measures, mail delivery can take up to three weeks. As a result, it is becoming more common to fax or email letters to Congressional offices. Visit www.house.gov or www.senate.gov for the contact details. For state contacts, go to your state Department of Education website.

Below are a few guidelines to keep in mind when writing a letter:

- Use personal or business letterhead, if possible. Be sure your name and return address is on your communication.
- Be brief. Keep letters concise, ideally no longer than one-page.
- State your reason for writing. Your personal experience is usually the strongest reason. Explain how the issue affects your school district, your students, or your child. Do you represent a group of parents or teachers? Be sure to include that as well.
- Be specific in your request. Express clearly and briefly what action you would like the recipient to take, such as providing support of an issue, cosponsoring a particular bill, supporting a specific program funding level, or passage of a specific measure. Include bill numbers or other reference information whenever possible.
- Be reasonable and constructive. If you oppose a measure, state clearly why the measure is a concern. If possible, offer an alternative. Include examples or data where possible, being careful not to make any unsupportable claims. Misinformation casts doubt on you and your views.
- Ask the recipient to provide his/her position in a written reply.
- Be sure to thank the recipient if he/she responds the way you requested or indicates strong support for your issue. Everyone appreciates - and remembers - a complimentary letter.

Addressing Federal Correspondence: Use the following format when addressing your letter:

To a Senator:
The Honorable [full name]
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator [lastname]:

To a Representative:

The Honorable [full name]
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative [lastname]:

Note: When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, it is proper to address them as: Dear Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman, or Madam Speaker.

2. Electronic Communications

Making a Constituent Telephone Call

A telephone call can be effective when you want to record your views on an upcoming vote or when your opinion can be stated very concisely. Calls are not an effective way to educate legislators, nor do they provide the opportunity to demonstrate your expertise on an issue. In most cases, receptionists handle the calls and their goal is to simply make a record of the call. In some legislatures and in Congressional offices, it may be possible to speak directly with a staff member working for your elected official to provide a bit more information.

When making a telephone call to elected officials, keep the following in mind:

- State your views clearly and succinctly - time is precious for everyone.
- Conclude your message with a request for action.
- Be prepared to leave your name, address, and telephone number.

Email Messages

Although email has become standard business practice, there are several considerations to keep in mind before sending email messages.

By all means, where you already have a relationship with an office, use email as you would with any other business relationship. Email can also be a good way to make initial contact with an office when requesting a meeting. Emails and phone calls are also effective ways to voice your views on an upcoming vote or other key decision.

However, many state and federal elected officials receive a high volume of email in their general email inbox that may take time for the office to wade through, which may affect the timeliness of your message. And, many elected officials rely on online "forms" for email submissions that require zipcode checks so that non-constituents are not able to submit messages. This can become an issue for statewide advocacy: it may not be possible, for example, for the legislative chair or officer of a statewide group to send emails to every member of the state's general assembly or to every U.S. Representative from the state because he/she is not a constituent of each of these offices. In these cases, we recommend faxing letters to offices using the association's letterhead. Finally, when you do use email to make advocacy contacts, be sure to include your full name and your complete mailing address so that the office is able to respond to you.

3. In-person Meetings with Legislators

Face-to-face meetings are the most effective means to convey a message and can be a way to establish a long-term relationship with your elected officials and their staffs. Keep in mind that successful advocacy requires a sustained effort, not simply one letter, email, phone call, or meeting.

Although your locally elected officials are likely nearby, you may never have had the opportunity to meet your elected representatives in your state capital or in Washington, DC. However, your state and federal representatives also have local offices, sometimes staffed by part-time employees. Your local school board members also have offices

where they meet with constituents. You can find the office locations and phone numbers on line through local, state, and Congressional websites or in a separate government section of your phonebook.

No matter which official you're trying to see, there are several steps to take, planning as far in advance as possible:

Making an Appointment: Call your elected official's office and ask to speak with the person who sets up appointments. Be prepared to provide information about yourself (or your group), the topic you'd like to discuss, and have a range of days (or times) when you can meet. You may be asked to follow up your phone call with an email or fax request with all the same details. If the official has more than one office, and you can be flexible about where and when you meet, be sure to let the appointments person know. In cases where the official is completely unavailable, you may want to meet with the staff person handling education issues as a way to introduce yourself (or group) and your issue. In many cases, staff can be very helpful and the meeting can be very productive, but don't abandon the intent to meet personally with your elected officials at a later date.

Prepare for the Meeting: Have your information ready in a concise form, just as you would when writing a letter, sending an email, or making a telephone call. Prepare the strongest two or three reasons why the official should support your views; practice your conversation with a friend. Be sure to know possible arguments against your request so that you can respond to questions or concerns. If possible, develop a simple packet of information to leave behind so that the official or staff member can begin a file on your issue. Bring a business card if you have one.

At the Meeting: Be on time, of course. But don't be surprised if the official is running late. Making visits, especially with Members of Congress or state legislators during a legislative session, requires flexibility and patience. Once the meeting begins:

- State the reason for your visit in one sentence. Then, take your cue from the official: if he or she seems familiar with the issue, move right ahead with your request for support for a specific vote or other position. If not, use the time to inform him/her to the key elements of the issue.
- When possible, give local examples and make local analogies so that the official understands the potential impact on constituents of your request.
- Elected officials want to know how they can be helpful. Be sure you request him/her to take action. Be specific. For example: cosponsor a certain bill, vote for or against a bill, hold a hearing, or visit a school.
- If you are asked a question you are not able to answer, admit that you do not know, but that you will find out the answer and get back to him/her. Never make up an answer. Incorrect or misleading information will permanently damage your credibility.
- At the end of the meeting be sure to thank the official for his/her time, reiterating that you will follow up with any information you may have promised.
- If you are meeting on behalf of a state or local group, ask before the meeting if you can have your picture taken together so that you may use it in your newsletter or on your websites.

Follow up: If you promised to gather additional information, do so as soon as possible. Send a thank you letter to the official (or the staff, if that is with whom you met), capitalizing on the opportunity to restate your major points in the letter. If you used a photo in a newsletter or on a website, be sure to send a copy to the official's office. Keep track of the names of any staff that you met so that you can follow up with them and keep them apprised of new developments on your issue.

One other note: Elected officials often schedule community meetings to hear from constituents about local concerns. Many advocates are also active in their communities in other ways, crossing paths with elected officials at dinners, receptions, or other events. Take every opportunity to speak with and develop a relationship with those who represent you. Although you may not be able to discuss gifted education issues at every event, you may have a moment to ask the official if you might meet with him/her in the near future to discuss your concerns.

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