

How to Make Your Voice Heard Year Round

Members of the Legislature value clear, concise and informative communication from education advocates. As decision makers in schools, administrators and board members are in a good position to know what policies work and don't work in the public schools.

Write Your Legislators

Personal, thoughtful letters have a considerable impact on your members of Congress. When writing your letters, keep the following in mind:

- **Focus on one issue or bill** per letter and identify the bill by name and number.
- **Express your point of view** and why your legislator should be supportive. Be brief and courteous.
- **Explain the local impact** of the legislation on your district.
- **Use your signature and personal letterhead** and state your role in the school system when writing an individual letter. *If it is a collective letter from the school board, have the president of the board sign it and put on the board's letterhead.*
- **E-mail your legislators** using MASB's e-Vocate at www.masb.org/evocate or MASA's Legislative Action Center at www.capwiz.com/gomasa.

Call Your Legislators

Phone calls are an effective and fast way to communicate with your legislators, especially when a critical vote is expected to occur. Sometimes you may be able to talk directly with your legislator or their education staffer and have a more substantive conversation. Other times, your calls may be tallied by whomever answers the phone and that person will inform the legislator of given counts of constituents for and against a particular issue. When phoning your legislators, keep the following in mind:

- **Ask to speak with the legislator staffer who handles the issue**, or briefly state your position to the receptionist.
- **Give your name**, title and school district.
- **Focus on one issue or bill**. Whenever possible, identify the bill by number and name.
- **Briefly state what position you want your legislator to take on the issue**. Be prepared to give a locally based rationale for your position.
- **Ask for your legislator's position on the bill**.
- **If asked, give your address** so that you can receive a written response.

Use the Media to Communicate with the Legislature

- **Stay local.** One strong article in your hometown newspaper may be worth ten in the *New York Times*.
- **Keep it focused.** Stick to one issue at a time.
- **Clip and send your good press.** A good article can have a long life. Make sure to send clippings to your legislators.
- **Don't forget your own media outlets.** Take advantage of school district newsletters, publications, radio and cable programs, and the district website to educate and get others involved in your advocacy campaigns.
- **Give just the facts.** Stick to what you know and never exaggerate. You can always get back to reporters after finding the right answer.
- **Don't just say it –show it.** A demonstration or real-life testimonial goes a long way to illustrate your point and make it more colorful.
- **Build media relationships.** Get to know the education reporters and take the time to meet with the editorial boards.
- **Put media relations in your advocacy policy.** Media relations should be a year-round function.
- **Appoint a press spokesperson for your school board.** In addition to the district press person, this contact person should be prepared to speak on all advocacy issues and should know what to tell reporters.
- **Take advantage of all the media outlets.** Don't limit yourself to just newspaper. Use TV, radio and the web to complement your newspaper strategy.

Write Letters-to-the-Editor & Opinion Editorials

Letters-to-the-Editor and opinion editorials (called op-eds) written by readers are useful ways to speak out on an issue, respond to an article or editorial, or express your position in your own words. They often are read by staffers and legislators and can be an effective lobbying tool. When writing a letter-to-the-editor or op-ed, keep in mind the following:

- **Be brief and focus on one issue.** If the article is too long, the newspaper may edit out some important facts. To get an idea of how long is too long, take a look at your newspaper's opinions page and count the words in the average letter to the editor. The average op-ed is usually longer than a letter-to-the-editor and is between 500 and 750 words.
- **For a letter-to-the-editor, refer to a recent event or article.** Citing past articles or events referenced in the newspaper can help bring relevance to your article. Cite the title and date of the original article.
- **When applicable, close your letter or op-ed** by asking readers to contact their members of the Legislature or other policymakers about the issue.
- **Give your address, school district and phone number.** Anonymous posts and letters have very little value.
- **Clip your published letter.** Clip the article or letter and forward on to your policymakers.

Meet with Editorial Boards

There is nothing more powerful than a newspaper carrying a positive lead editorial that supports your cause. Meeting with editorial boards in advance to explain your views can be the catalyst for a favorable editorial that will help address the issue at home as well as in Lansing. To facilitate a successful meeting, keep the following in mind:

- **Request a formal meeting.** Write a letter to the editorial page editor or call the editorial office to formally request a meeting. Briefly explain the issue you would like to discuss and who will be with you at the meeting.
- **Go to the meeting prepared to lay the facts on the table as well as your background material.** If possible, bring a coalition of school leaders to lend weight to the meeting.
- **Include local and broader implications of the issue.** When preparing background information it is helpful to frame the issue so the editor can see why this story would be good for a broad range of readers.
- **Keep the relationship going.** Once you have made contact with the members of the editorial board, maintain that contact. Send a thank you note for the meeting and another note if they run a favorable editorial.

Invite Your Legislators to an Event in the District

During the year, the legislature is on numerous recesses so members can visit their district. Typically, members of the Michigan Legislature work in Lansing on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and work in the district on Monday and Friday. Plan to take advantage of this opportunity to invite legislators to an event in the district.

- **Plan ahead.** Legislators maintain a very busy schedule and their calendars fill up quickly. Send your invitation several weeks in advance of the date for the event. Also send a follow-up to ensure that the event stays on the calendar as a priority.
- **Contact the right person.** Call your legislator's office to find out the proper procedure for a scheduling request.
- **Be flexible.** If at all possible, note in the invitation that you are willing to accommodate the legislator's schedule.
- **Work with the media.** If a legislator is coming to an event or to one of your buildings, work with the media to publicize that fact. All politicians love a good photo-op.

For more information on year-round communication with your legislators, contact MASB or MASA.