

## How Can We Effectively Advocate for Public Education?

A strong system of public education is critically important both for our children as individuals, as future citizens and for the commonwealth as a whole. The educational opportunities children receive in school today will impact the success they have later in life.

Lawmakers make decisions and pass laws every day. Special interests contact lawmakers regularly and have an enormous impact on how legislators vote. When our public education system fails to provide children with a quality education, children cannot hire lobbyists to go to Harrisburg to persuade legislators to fix their broken system: this is our job as parents and community members.

Those of us who care about our children and our public schools must be an active part of the conversation with lawmakers about their decisions that impact public education. Anyone can be an advocate. It doesn't have to take a lot of time (making a phone call takes less than 5 minutes!) and it makes a big difference. Contacting your own elected officials - keeping in touch with them by phone and making a visit to them 1-2 times per year – are key ways to support our children's education.

### HOW TO CALL YOUR LEGISLATOR

Calling your legislator is as easy as picking up the phone, providing your opinion in a thoughtful manner, and asking for a response.

#### **Why Do It?**

Our legislators are busy and public education may not be an issue they prioritize. When people call the office, it sends a message to legislators that their constituents are paying attention to what they're doing and it encourages them to make public education one of their top priorities.

#### **A Call Is Easy and Goes Something Like This:**

- Introduce yourself and identify yourself as a constituent.
- State your topic and say what you care about, support or oppose, and why.
- Give an example of your personal experience when possible.
- Ask for a follow-up response.

*A few tips:*

**Be very pleasant to the staff.** Don't expect to speak to your legislator. The staff is supposed to take your calls.

**Try to sound like yourself.** Share your sincere personal opinion and your reasons for it, in your own words.

**Keep it short.** A 2-3 minute call is usually plenty to say what you support (or oppose), why, and to give your contact information and ask for a response.

**Plan to call from time to time. It isn't like voting – you can do it more than once!**

## ORGANIZING A MEETING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

**Step 1 – Identify your state legislators.** Google “Find Your Legislator PA”.

**Step 2 – Decide if you’ll go on your own or with others.**

**Step 3 – Schedule a meeting.** Call your legislator’s district office and ask to set up a meeting. Give them a clear, succinct topic you are setting up the meeting, such as “public education funding.”

**Step 4 – Prepare for your meeting.** Gather a few facts and write down the main points you want to emphasize. Your job isn’t to know everything; your job is to share your point of view and your story with your legislator. The most important component is to have a clear “ask” (something specific you’d like them to do). A good example would be: “support charter school legislation that matches special education funding with the cost of services for students with disabilities.”

**Step 5 – Have a professional conversation.** This meeting is your chance to let your legislator know how his/her decisions in Harrisburg have impacted your local schools and communities and begin building a relationship with your legislator as you learn about how s/he views public education.

**Step 6– Write down notes from the meeting.** You’ll want to write down what your legislator says about these issues, especially what s/he supports and what his/her concerns and objections are.

**Step 7– Follow up.** Sometime during the first few days after the meeting, send a letter or email thanking your legislator for his/her time. Briefly recap what you discussed and reiterate any follow-up items (i.e., send along any additional information you may have wanted to provide but did not have at the time) and remind them of/thank them for any important commitments or statements.

### **Tips for a successful meeting**

***Be friendly.*** Don’t get heated; you’ll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

***Ask questions and try to hear what your legislator’s issues and concerns are.*** Make sure to listen, not just speak. Approach the conversation as presenting a case, not necessarily winning an argument. Hearing their feedback, or even their objections, can inform how you approach them in the future.

***Be prepared, but don’t feel like you have to be an expert.*** You are there to represent a perspective, not as an expert witness. Choose 2-3 points that you want to highlight and support those points, but don’t feel like you have to know everything about the topic. Remember: you are an “expert” on your point of view.

***Give examples.*** Help legislators understand how their decisions impact your community. Personal stories and experience are as important as facts and figures.

***You can say:*** “I don’t know,” “I can follow up with you,” and “I understand the issue is complex, but we still need to figure out how to solve the problem,” (if you feel like they are trying to say the problem is too complicated to do something about).

*If you have several people attending, **decide ahead of time who will make which point.** Everyone is more comfortable when there is a plan.*

***Stay on message.*** Keep the conversation on the topic you came to talk about.

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”*

*–Margaret Mead*

**Education Voters** works with individuals and organizations throughout the Commonwealth, engaging people in discussions about education policy and providing tools to help people advocate for great public schools in every community. By joining our voices together, we demonstrate that public education is an important issue in the communities our legislators represent.