

## ADVOCACY AND YOUR LEGISLATOR

A former school board member once said “a public education system without school boards would mean no advocacy at the statehouse for the children of our community.” “With no school board,” he said, “each and every school district would be brought into the fold of cookie-cutter curriculum and programs, much like your retail markets of today.”

Being an advocate for public education and local control in your community and at the legislature is crucial to preserving your district and your community’s way of life. CASB and other associations can’t do it alone. They need advocacy from the home front, from the front lines, where you are.

As written in CASB Associate Executive Director Jane Urschel’s article, *Develop an “ILP” (Individualized Lobbying Plan) as you advocate on behalf of your district*, the single most powerful force in state lobbying is “the influence of those living and working in the district of each elected legislator.”

Urschel writes that in order for you to become a “power lobbyist” or a strong advocate for your district, it is important to create an Individualized Lobbying Plan (ILP) for your legislator. Below is a portion of her article on creating an ILP.

Before we develop an ILP for your state representatives and senators, we need to examine and agree upon some basic concepts that are fundamental to a democracy and our system of government in the United States. The first simple concept is that lobbying is a citizen's right to influence government, guaranteed by the First Amendment to the constitution, "The Congress shall make no law . . . abridging . . . the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition for redress of grievances." While the framers of our constitution clearly intended to "bar the people from direct rule," they also believed that every citizen should understand and be engaged in the political process.

Robert Louis Stevenson noted, "Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary." This observation introduces a second basic concept for our consideration. James Madison and John Stuart Mill concurred that preparation to serve in a legislature was less important than legislators attending their "legislative school to get a good education in public affairs."

We could see the newly elected legislators as we see new students about to enter the classroom for the first time. The legislative body becomes a diverse student body; lobbyists and others exist as faculty members who teach the students a specific topic "cramming" their students' heads with facts, arguments, and reason, preparing them for the tests of floor debate and negotiation.

Educators should approach the Capitol with the same comfort level as they approach schools. Inside, we find people weighed down with books and talking in the halls. This school has bells, "whips," homework, rules, bull sessions and

classes. Freshmen wander the halls looking unsure. Seniors play pranks on them, rag them in debate and initiate them into the traditions of the house.

**Step 1: Build a trusting relationship with the legislator.** If you are going to become a "legislative tutor," get to know your student back home in the district. Form a relationship by simply calling up your representative or senator and asking them out for coffee. This is a time to get to know them as people and not a time to teach them. In fact, let them teach you about why they ran for office and what they hope to accomplish. Once you establish a trusting relationship with a legislator in private, you will be able to enjoy that relationship in public, say, at the Capitol.

**Step 2: Become a reliable and trustworthy resource for your legislator.** You can help legislators get a handle on a problem by sharing the "real world" effects of proposals. One legislator put it this way:

One of the best ways to get a handle on a problem is to relate it to my district. I take the concept back and talk with a doctor or a teacher and let them tell me how it would affect them practically.

Always remember that the integrity of your word and your commitment to confidentiality will be tested throughout this relationship. Your word must be impeccable if you want to have any credibility with your legislators.

**Step 3: Plan your visit.** Who to visit? When to visit? Where to visit? How to make the appointment?

Prioritize visits to begin with supporters of your legislative issue. Direct the greatest amount of your time on the undecided majority party members and then the minority party members. Don't forget to lobby the chair of the committee of first referral for your bill. Do not spend time visiting lawmakers who strongly oppose your bill. Send them letters that describe why your bill is good for the state and for their constituents.

Try to meet with legislators early before the opposition to your bill meets with them. Obtain a legislative calendar showing when legislators are in their home district or at the Capitol. Calendars show when lawmakers should be in committee, in full session, or in the office.

Visit lawmakers in places where you can get their attention--in their home district, at the Capitol, social gatherings, conventions, or take them to lunch.

Schedule appointments with lawmakers before the legislature goes into session, early in the session, or when there is a lull in the session. A few days before the appointment date, confirm the meeting time and briefly reiterate what you plan to discuss.

**Step four: Lobby by testimony.** Legislators appreciate testimony given in committee from people in the field. This is the opportunity to tell your story on the "factory floor of the legislative process." When you testify, be brief and to-the-point. Know what you want to say. Try not to read from a printed page. Use examples to illustrate your points about how bills will actually affect students. Tell the truth. If you don't know, say so. Be yourself.

**Step five: Lobby by telephone.** Telephoning a legislator can be an effective way to persuade a legislator. Identify yourself by name, address and hometown. Identify the bill you wish to speak about by number. Briefly state your position on the bill and how you would like the legislator to vote on the bill. Ask for your legislator's position on the bill. Thank the legislator for past votes.

**Step six (the most important): Arrange for America's legislators to get back in the classroom.** You can bring civics back to life by inviting legislator to visit classrooms. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) sponsors "America's Legislators Back to School Week" in September. NCSL provides resource and marketing materials to legislators, school, teachers and the media.

Legislators have a strong effect on the personal lives of educators. Their policies influence all aspects of teaching and learning. Become a legislative tutor; develop an "ILP" for your representatives and senators. Lobbying is teaching legislators about your issues and the facts needed to convince them to support your view rather than that of your opposition.

**Finally, look to CASB as a resource in your local advocacy efforts.** CASB's advocacy efforts are ongoing, whether the General Assembly is in session or not. CASB tracks education-related bills during the legislative session and sends out a weekly legislative newsletter on key legislation of interest. CASB also asks each local board to designate a representative to the CASB Legislative Network. CASB sends legislative alerts to the LegNet representative and depends on each district's representative to keep CASB informed about issues of interest to his or her local district. The remainder of the year is spent working on issues, meeting with key policymakers and formulating CASB's legislative agenda at the CASB Delegate Assembly.

This column drew from: Guide To State Legislative Lobbying, Robert L. Guyer and Legislature: California's School for Politics, William K. Muir, Jr.

Inside Education: Solutions For Success ([www.insideeducation.net](http://www.insideeducation.net)), Online Columnist, Dr. Jane Urschel, September 2001.

