

CHAPTER 5

Advocacy: Your voice is important. You are an advocate.

School board members are advocates for the schools in their community. That advocacy is critical to the success of students, teachers and administrators and the efficient operation of local schools. CASB is constantly in contact with school board members across the state, and it gathers their suggestions, concerns and policy ideas at meetings throughout the year.

CASB's advocacy team represents the best interests of school boards as it interacts with education organizations, political leaders and business leaders at the state and national levels. When legislative proposals concerning education are being considered and developed, CASB is there to protect the interests of local school boards and to provide data, advice and assistance to legislators.

The perspective of school boards is a critical component in the creation of legislation that respects local control and focuses on the success of all students. And in fact, school boards, working with CASB, have for decades helped shape significant legislation involving K–12 education in Colorado.

In this chapter, we will discuss ways you can be involved in advocacy and in helping to define CASB's policy agenda, and we'll outline CASB tools and resources you can use in your district and beyond.

SHAPING A STATEWIDE POLICY AGENDA

LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS COMMITTEE

School board members play a critical role in determining CASB's legislative platform and priorities. Each summer, CASB issues a call-for-resolutions request to every member school board as an opportunity to provide input on public education issues for the next legislative session. CASB compiles the proposed resolutions, prepares research data and distributes the information to the Legislative Resolutions Committee, which reviews resolutions and makes recommendations to the CASB Delegate Assembly. Additionally, the committee reviews legislative proposals, discusses issues and advises CASB staff of the issues school board members would like brought to the attention of the General Assembly.

CASBtip

Being an advocate for public education and local control in your community and at the legislature is crucial to preserving your district and community's way of life. Board members are encouraged to take advantage of the resources CASB offers to help you connect with your legislators and make your voice heard, including legislative updates and alerts through *Colorado Capitol Watch*, *School Board Advocate* newsletter informing members about the latest developments at the state capitol that impact K-12 education, and compilations of education bills introduced each year by the legislature, including a summary of each piece of legislation and CASB's position on the bill.

The advocacy section of CASB's website, casb.org, also connects you to many informational sources that can help you get a handle on legislative issues and processes, including publications, key issues, talking points, legislative priorities and resolutions.

about local concerns regarding the effect unfunded federal mandates have on Colorado's public education. The committee closely follows federal legislation and keeps members informed about federal issues and how they impact local school districts.

ADVOCACY BEGINS AT HOME

Communicating your challenges and successes to policymakers is a key role and responsibility during your time on the school board.

As a board member, you have tremendous credibility with legislators – they often mention how important it is for them to hear from school board members on education issues. Additionally, you speak as another elected public official, in touch with your community and charged with doing what is right for your constituents.

DELEGATE ASSEMBLY

CASB's Delegate Assembly meets in the fall to establish the legislative priorities, resolutions and beliefs of the association. *Each member school board is encouraged to name one member as a voting delegate.* During the assembly, proposed resolutions are debated, amended, approved or rejected; additional resolutions may be submitted from the floor. Members of the Legislative Resolutions Committee are on hand to answer questions from delegates about the committee's recommendations and to offer insight into a particular issue.

The resolutions adopted by the assembly provide a framework to guide CASB's advocacy efforts and set the general direction for the legislative program for the following year. In January, the CASB Board of Directors prioritizes resolutions passed at the Delegate Assembly and gives guidance to staff for action during the General Assembly. Throughout the legislative session, the Legislative Resolutions Committee meets regularly to analyze implications of proposed legislation and decide the positions the advocacy team will take on introduced bills.

FEDERAL RELATIONS NETWORK COMMITTEE

Through CASB's Federal Relations Network, the advocacy team and committee members keep in touch with Colorado's congressional delegation to convey the position of local school boards on federal issues and respond to lobbying requests from the National School Boards Association. Every year, CASB representatives travel to Washington, D.C., to lobby the Colorado congressional delegation

CONNECTING WITH LEGISLATORS

One of the best ways to make connections with legislators is to invite them to schools and school board meetings. This helps create a bond with the board and the community, and it opens a channel of communication to discuss the needs of Colorado’s schools and students and to celebrate the successes of education in Colorado.

Close connections are best made before the legislative session so lawmakers can recall previous conversations when board members make contact during the heat of committee hearings or at the end of the session.

As you advocate on behalf of your school district, the single most powerful force in state lobbying is the influence of those living and working in the district of each elected legislator. In order for you to become a strong advocate for your district, it is important to know the keys to effective lobbying and to create an Individualized Lobbying Plan (ILP) for your legislators. See page 42 for a sample ILP form.

DAYS AT THE CAPITOL

This CASB advocacy program runs January through April during the legislative session and gives school board members – from rural districts tucked away in the mountains or spread out on the plains to large districts neighboring the state capitol – a chance to experience the legislative process firsthand. It’s a way to learn how the legislative process works, from observing the House and Senate from the floor to watching legislators in action at the Education Committee meetings to touring the capitol. Spending a day at the capitol also is an opportunity to build relationships with your legislators – meeting them face-to-face, inviting them to lunch or a school board meeting, or talking to them about your district’s successes, needs or concerns.

BACK TO SCHOOL WEEK FOR LEGISLATORS

The National Conference of State Legislatures sponsors “America’s Legislators Back to School Week” in September. For more information, resources and marketing materials, visit www.ncsl.org. Or email btsp@ncsl.org.

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE LOBBYING

KNOW YOUR LEGISLATORS

Knowing your legislators and their staff members is the first step to having your voice heard. The beginning of the school year is a great time to invite legislators to a board meeting or to visit a school. Establishing a connection with your legislator early is a primary step in the process of providing information and getting to know each other before the legislative session begins.

- Know each legislator's party, committee assignments, priorities and history.
- Know where their children and grandchildren go to school.
- Find out whether your legislators have been a teacher, board member or have family members in education.
- Find out why they ran for office and what they hope to accomplish.
- Ask whether they prefer to be contacted by phone, email or postal mail.
- Ask them to describe their goals and vision for Colorado education.
- Contact CASB for questions to help you determine if candidates or legislators support public education.

BE A SOURCE OF RELIABLE AND CREDIBLE INFORMATION

- Give your legislators your home, work and cell numbers and your email address so they can reach you at any time. You want legislators to consider your input before a vote.
- Remind legislators that school boards do not run on a partisan ticket.
- Be willing to share your insight and experience as a board member on issues legislators will have to vote on.
- Be ready to provide accurate, persuasive information on how legislation will affect your district and its policies. Use data as well as real-life and community examples of those effects. Work with your superintendent to develop the information you need.
- Build coalitions locally to meet your legislators together – there is strength in numbers.

MAKE YOUR LEGISLATORS EXPERTS ON YOUR DISTRICT

- Provide information on your district at every opportunity.
- Always leave information in writing – political experts still say that a handwritten letter is the best way to communicate with legislators. Even if a legislator prefers receiving email, it's still good to follow up with a handwritten thank you or more information.
- Send lawmakers copies of your annual progress report to show how your district is working to improve student achievement and be accountable to your community.
- Share good news and accomplishments, especially if they were made possible by past legislation.
- Send news clippings or links from your local newspaper or other publications frequently and particularly when the legislature is in session.
- Invite legislators to your schools, staff development training, board meetings or PTA meetings.
- Give legislators stories from your community they can use to make their points in floor debates.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

- Attend meetings and forums that your legislators hold in their communities.
- Pick a good time to get your point across.
- 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.
- Use post-vote connections to thank legislators and advocate other issues.

FOLLOW YOUR LEGISLATORS' ACTIONS

- Ask legislators how they will vote on an issue. Let your legislator know you need their support or no vote on education issues.
- If a legislator is not supportive, let him or her know that you know how they voted. Convey the message that you appreciate their time, but the children of your district need their vote.
- If a legislator was supportive, thank him or her for that support.
- If visiting the capitol or with legislators, give priority to supporters of your legislative issue.
- Direct the greatest amount of your time on the undecided majority party members and then the minority party members.
- Do not spend time visiting lawmakers who strongly oppose your bill.

DON'T FORGET COLORADO'S GOVERNOR

- Send letters and emails and make phone calls to the governor's office.
- Invite the governor to your district if something special can showcase student learning in a unique way.
- The governor's budget is the template for decision-making. Ensuring that the governor is well informed on education needs can pave the way for legislative progress.
- If unfavorable legislation passes, remember that the governor's veto power is the last chance to make a difference.
- Contact candidates for governor and let them know your priorities before the election in November.

ALL POLITICS ARE LOCAL

- Recruit local advocates who care about public education to help you explain your students' needs to your legislators. Talk to chamber of commerce members, service organization partners, church friends, farmers, retired board members, school staff members and parents – anyone who needs your district to provide the best possible education to your students.
- Encourage citizens to advocate on behalf of your district. Feel free to forward CASB action and legislative alert emails.

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER ILP: YOUR INDIVIDUALIZED LOBBYING PLAN

My Senator is: _____

My Representative is: _____

1. What are you doing now that you can build on to increase your lobbying effort?

2. Which legislators do you wish to lobby?

3. What can you do to help build a trusting relationship with the legislator(s)?

4. Where is the best place and when will be the best time for you to schedule an initial meeting with the legislator(s)?

5. Who will meet with which legislator(s)?

6. What is your main message?

7. What story best illustrates your message?

8. After your initial meeting, what steps will you take to become a reliable and trustworthy resource for your legislator(s)?

9. How will you gather testimony to present to the legislator(s)?

10. What can you do to make visiting a classroom a priority for the legislator(s)?

11. What additional steps will you take to maintain a relationship with the legislator(s) throughout his/her tenure?
