

Tips for Developing Positive Working Relationships With Legislators

Developing a credible and effective working relationship with legislators is enhanced by keeping in mind six key points:

- **First**, build a relationship with legislators *prior* to the opening of the session. It's helpful to identify each legislator's position on current issues. These can be identified through newspaper articles and the voting record available through state school board, administrator, or education associations. It is also helpful to identify any special connections the legislator may have to your district or to education, such as children or grandchildren who attend local schools. The better you know the beliefs, opinions, and expectations of the legislator, the better you will be able to shape messages in ways that are understood by and meaningful to him or her.
- **Second**, work with your legislators to identify the process they want you to use to provide them with information. Many legislators prefer to receive your opinions in writing, via letter, fax, or e-mail. Other communication options include phone calls to specific legislative aides, regular meetings with your district's school board members, legislative hot line calls, or area meetings with multiple legislators and school board members from surrounding districts. You can also provide information about the district from newspaper articles or district newsletters sent to the legislator's aides.
- **Third**, don't be bashful about helping your legislator know your district's needs. Your legislator must know the special attributes, initiatives, and needs of your district that could be impacted by legislation. Invite him or her to special events, such as grandparent programs, school dedications, and business breakfasts. Legislators like opportunities to learn more about your district and to be visible among their constituency. While they may not attend an entire event, they will often attend a portion of an event to lend their support and to be seen among their constituency. When meeting regularly with legislators to discuss legislation, include on the agenda a feature, which highlights a district initiative. Providing background information about the district before issues arise enables you to communicate quickly and prevents you from having to build understanding of issues on short notice.
- **Fourth**, understand and respect the legislative process timeline. Knowing when to contact legislators is the critical issue. It is important to identify the timelines for legislative decisions to enable communications to "strike when the iron is hot." If communication comes too long before a vote, the issue and position may be forgotten; and lobbying after the vote rarely has any effect. Communicating two to five days before a vote can give legislators the best advantage in knowing your position and provide the opportunity for them to seek clarification if necessary. It also enables the legislators to share their thoughts with other members of the legislature.
- **Fifth**, know how to communicate. Options are most influenced through one-on-one conversations with someone you know. The least effective communications are mass-produced, non-personal letters to someone you do not know. Therefore, contacting local legislators can be the most effective communications, as the district represents local voter opinion. Contacting speakers of the party and chairs of the

Education and Finance Committees-along with authors of particular legislation-can be helpful to you, but your efforts will be enhanced if you personally know the legislators or have a unique link that will cause them to respect your opinion.

- **Sixth**, follow up after the vote. Good rules of etiquette apply when working with legislators. Thank-you letters and other commendations for support of legislation, which benefit the district are appropriate. It's equally important to respectfully acknowledge a legislator's decision not to support a district position. An appropriate communication could be a letter of concern indicating your respect for the legislator's position while also supplying data or other evidence of how a vote may be problematic for your district. It's also important to offer an invitation to meet with the legislators to discuss the implications of his or her vote and to identify future legislation, which might assist the district.