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Advocacy: Your voice is their voice

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore September 9, 2024



Temperatures are getting cooler in most of the country, while political races are heating up. The higher up you go in the school district hierarchy, the more political your role becomes.

Superintendents, in particular, and even cabinet members, will find themselves being asked questions about current political decisions. You'll want to have thoughtful and consistent answers ready.

For the purposes of this article, we will focus on state advocacy. We will describe what advocacy is and what it isn't, and share some helpful tips to strengthen your advocacy efforts while energizing your board for constructive work with you, your community and elected officials.

Let's start by making a distinction between advocacy and lobbying. While both are pivotal in shaping public policy, advocacy and lobbying serve different functions.

Advocacy is the broader of the two, comprising activities that raise awareness, educate stakeholders and mobilize community support to build commitment for K12 education and momentum for your students and teachers. This can sometimes include direct communication with legislators or government officials to express the current state in your community as it relates to things like budget appropriations. This is not lobbying.

Lobbying is a form of advocacy that attempts to influence specific legislation as it relates to things like budget appropriations or issues such as cell phone bans or class sizes. As a public



school official, they want to hear from you and your board. You can and should engage in advocacy efforts, working closely with your board or board legislative liaison to empower and support initiatives that align with your district's goals.

Advocacy is how executive education leaders champion ideas to influence positive change for stakeholders. You want to be at the table when decisions are being made that affect your work but there is before, during and follow up work that must be done.

Pre-work

Know your role. You are a communications coordinator. In other words, it's your job to represent your stakeholders accurately and with integrity.

You want to make sure you are interacting with broad groups within your community and you have multiple mechanisms to hear their voice—things like routine town halls, surveys, committee discussions and feedback from your board members who are meeting with other elected officials and influencers.

Do your homework. Do you have a database of your local officials? Who are they? Have they worked with your board before and what issues resonate with them? Answering these key questions will help you shape your messages clearly and memorably align to their areas of interest.

You need to have the pulse of the community voice and be able to back it up. This is how you build credibility and trust. Consider developing an issues framework, answering: which stakeholder groups make up my community and what are their key concerns? Then consider how you can test your assumptions of their concerns and maintain a feedback channel with them.

Share the issues framework with board members and get their feedback on it. Does your state association have similar issues? If so, then you have a match and they may have more data and information to shore up your arguments.

Next, you need a solid one-pager to frame your work. This acts as a briefing sheet that represents your school district, students and families in a concise way. Start right at the top with your compelling issue or needs statement.

You should have at least one picture to humanize the piece, along with some basic data, such as demographic information, achievement data, budget details and issues for which you need support that are aligned to your strategic plan. Don't assume that legislators or policy-makers know what makes your district unique.

Employ signposting or taglines to make your message memorable. Less is more so be sure to employ graphics that hone in on your key messages. Here is an example of a strong and succinct use of graphics from [Los Angeles USD](#). In this example from the [City School District of Albany](#), we see more content, but it's chunked into readable sections that will allow the reader to find what interests them the most. Either way, make it your own since it represents your community.

Consider pre-selling your message through the use of some of the steps above. Make good use of pre-session committees, and the timing of these meetings are messaging targets.



They will remember getting correspondence from you and will recognize you when it's "go time."

Present work

One thing is universally true about politics: Very often the important decisions have been made long before the formal meetings happen. There is no avoiding this but it also doesn't have to be as discouraging as it seems. That's why taking time now, before winter break, is important. Get started before the next legislative session begins.

Engaging with your board in advocacy work is an important part of your job. Help them understand and grasp the valuable narrative you've developed so they can bring further attention to key issues that impact your stakeholders.

Remember the key of repetition: You and your board should say the same thing to the same people repeatedly and consistently if you want to get your point across. How many times have you seen an insurance commercial on TV and rolled your eyes? There's a reason for this.

Repetition is effective. Here are some tips:

- Be clear on your core message, "We really need you to understand the impact of..."
- Offer multiple examples, "We've heard this impact from families, teachers, etc., in these ways..."
- Use visual media, "Here is a photo of a family taken at our local high school..."
- Watch your jargon, avoid saying, "Our AYP for ELLs is lagging, we can't keep up with ESEA..."
- Be present, leave the one-pager behind, to reinforce your points.

Remember the first few sentences you say will be the ones they remember, so open strong and be sure to thank them for their time.

Post-work

Inexperienced advocates think when the conversation is over, it's over. Experienced advocates know you must keep the communication loop going after the visit.

Set a tickler to follow up immediately after with a thank you message that reinforces your key points. Send another message one week later and if possible, share any relevant events, news or updates that reinforce your point. Remember to encourage your board and team to consider any elected official when developing event invitations or newsletters to keep decision makers coming to your table. Personal experiences matter and they go a long way.

There can be downsides to advocacy too. Sadly, no advocacy efforts are created equal. Sometimes communications and influence skills can be used to support the wrong issues. Fortunately, staying aligned to your board and strategic plan will keep you on track.

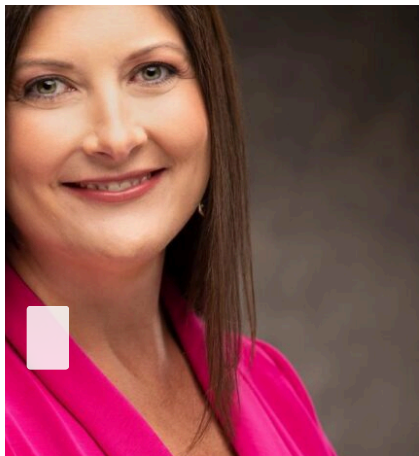
Through advocacy, public school officials can effectively contribute to the shaping of policies that impact education without crossing the legal boundaries that define lobbying activities.



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