

Advocating to Lawmakers

“They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.”

- Andy Worhol

PTA defines *advocacy* as the act of mobilizing individuals and local PTAs to work with the state and National PTAs to spark changes in programs and policies that benefit children. An effective advocacy campaign is built on activities and events that keep the PTA issue visible and motivate people to act.

Lawmakers and the public will listen if a large group of people speaks out.

Things don't just happen. They're made to happen.”

- John F. Kennedy

There are many ways in which PTA members can speak with one voice for children. It is always helpful to tell your personal story, along with the PTA position, when communicating with lawmakers. Communication can be one-on-one, by telephone, with a letter, or by e-mail. When the issue has been decided, send a note of appreciation when a lawmaker supports your issue. When he or she does not support your issue, explain why you feel a different decision would have been better. Do NOT burn bridges – that lawmaker may support your position on a future issue.

Personal Visits with Lawmakers

Personal visits are a most effective way to communicate with lawmakers. You may want to visit one-on-one or in small groups. Too large a group can prevent meaningful discussion. The following are tips for successful visits:

Schedule an appointment.

Draft an agenda and list the issues to be discussed. If it's a group meeting, decide who will speak, and on what issues.

Introduce yourself and members of your group. Tell them that you are members of the PTA.

State your position and listen to the legislator's point of view.

Be polite and present your arguments in a respectful manner.

Be open to questions. If you don't know the answer, explain that you'll get back with more information – then be sure to follow up!

Ask how the lawmaker will vote on the issue.

Thank the lawmaker for his or her time with you.

Leave information about the topics discussed with the lawmaker so they can refer to it later.

Leave your contact information so that they can reach you if they have questions about these, or other, PTA issues.

ALWAYS send a thank-you note following a visit and include any additional information that would be helpful to the lawmaker.

Letters and Postcards

Letters are used to alert lawmakers to your views and to help educate PTA members about issues. Letters should express an opinion in the writer's own words. Avoid form letters; instead modify sample letters or talking points so that you communicate PTA's message in a way that speaks with one voice for all children.

When writing, give attention to the following:

ALWAYS include your return address so they know you are a constituent.

Handwritten letters or postcards are great – they are personal and it is obvious that they are not form letters.

If it is handwritten, they will read it – guaranteed!

Use the correct address (The Honorable *full name*) and the correct salutation (Dear Senator *lastname*, Dear Representative *lastname*, or Dear Governor *lastname*).

Give the PTA position.

Show how the issue will affect children.

Write your message in your own words.

Explain what action you want to happen.

Stick to one issue per letter or group similar issues such as those dealing with child safety, or those dealing with education funding.

Phone Calls and E-mails

Phone calls and e-mails are effective, especially when timing is critical and the lawmaker's support or vote is needed immediately. Following are tips for communicating your views:

When phoning, ask to speak to the lawmaker. U.S. senators and representatives have aides who handle various issues. If the lawmaker is not available, ask if you can speak to the aide assigned to the issue. State legislators generally do not have aides. If neither the lawmaker nor an aide is available, leave a message.

When phoning, be open to questions. If you don't know the answer, explain that you'll get back with more information – then be sure to follow up!

Explain that you are from the lawmaker's district.

When sending an e-mail, use the subject line to let them know you are from their district by writing "Constituent of district #___ and your name." Include your mailing address and phone number with your name at the end of the email.

Explain why the issue is important to your PTA.

Ask the lawmaker to vote in your favor.

Thank the lawmaker for his or her time and consideration.

With each call or email, stick to one issue or group similar issues such as those dealing with child safety, or those dealing with education funding

Telephone Trees and E-mail Trees

A telephone tree or e-mail tree is a great way to make a large number of contacts with lawmakers in a short amount of time. The system has a few lead people who send information to others who, in turn, forward the information to the people on their lists. Iowa PTA has a legislative network which is used to send information to local PTA presidents and other advocates. PTA presidents should then forward the information to their members in order to generate a large number of letters, e-mails and phone calls to legislators. To join the Iowa PTA Legislative Network, send your e-mail address to ia_office@pta.org with a message saying that you would like to join the legislative network. National PTA also has a legislative network which you can join by going to: http://www.pta.org/take_action.asp and signing up for the newsletter, *This Week in Washington*. A name and e-mail address are all that is required.

Using the Media

Letters to the editor are an effective way of informing the public and lawmakers about issues and PTA positions. Most newspapers have websites where you can enter your letter online, or an e-mail address for sending letters. Be concise, specific and factual when you discuss your issue. Present detail about the local impact of your concern. Be sure to include your name and phone number. You may include your PTA title ONLY if you are representing the official position of the PTA (local, state or national) in your opinion. Do NOT use your PTA title if this is your own personal opinion.

Call in to radio talk shows when legislative issues are being discussed.

Testifying and Speaking in Public

Speaking publicly as a panelist or as a spokesperson before a group is a part of advocacy. Public testimony can be given before a school board, a town council, or state or federal legislators. In either a written or oral statement, give the PTA's position and how you want lawmakers to do. When presenting:

Prepare both content (what you will say) and delivery (how you will say it).

Know your audience; say what's important to them.

Emphasize key points over and over (that's your "sound bite").

Use visual aids if appropriate.

Be brief.

For legislative resources and information on how to contact lawmakers, go to:

http://www.iowapta.org/en/legislative/legislative_resources.cfm

Seven Steps to Advocacy in Action

1. Define Your Issue

This is your “elevator speech.” It should be several sentences that you can deliver, in your own words, to a legislator or a potential advocate in two or three minutes.

2. Find Your Allies

Communicate regularly with allies to unify your message and share information and strategies. Leaders in each organization should forward information to their members and affiliates.

3. Know Your Facts

Learn about your issue. Compile facts, data and background material. Use facts and data to create “talking points” that you can share with fellow advocates so that you are all speaking with a collective voice. The “talking points” can be referred to when writing letters and making phone calls to legislators.

If a bill is in the legislature, include information about the bill in your talking points. To get a copy of a bill, go to: <http://www.legis.state.ia.us/asp/Cool-ICE/DisplayBills.htm> and enter the bill number. When the bill comes up on the screen you can highlight it and print it. You can also click on Complete Bill History to see action that has been taken on the bill. Click on the SJ or HJ numbers in the bill’s history to learn how legislators voted on the bill and other details.

To get amendments to a bill, go to:

<http://www.legis.state.ia.us/asp/Cool-ICE/ByBillNumber.htm>

NOTE:

Be aware that bill numbers frequently change as an issue goes through the legislative process.

4. Identify the Decision Makers

Iowa Legislature www.legis.state.ia.us

Governor Vilsack www.governor.state.ia.us

To find email addresses for legislators

Go to www.legis.state.ia.us and click on Legislators on the left sidebar. Then select House Email Addresses or Senate Email Addresses. Highlight the email address you want to contact and copy it onto your email.

To send email to all senators or all representatives:

Highlight the list and copy and paste it into a word document on your computer and save it. Then you can access that file, highlight all email addresses and copy and paste them to your e-mail.

Don’t know who your legislators are?

Find your legislators at: www.legis.state.ia.us/FindLeg/

Contact information for legislators and Governor (mail, phone, email)

http://www.iowapta.org/files/documents/pdf/State_Lawmakers_Contact_List.pdf

5. Know How Decisions Are Made

It is important to know how the legislative process works, how a bill becomes law, and to be familiar with the terminology. Helpful materials are available at no cost from the Legislative Information Office (LIO) located in room G16 in the capitol building. Many resources are available online from the LIO at:

<http://www.legis.state.ia.us/Educational.html>

6. Sustain Your Vision

Provide allies with information, talking points and updates.

Tell them exactly how they can help and provide them with choices.

Look for potential advocates at every event and offer various ways for them to get involved.

Replenish your volunteers with additional helpers to avoid burnout in the long-term.

Communicate with legislators often – create relationships whenever possible.

It is most effective to write your own legislator, but it is also important for the committee chairman to hear from advocates. If the bill is in committee, send email to your legislator and send a copy to the committee chairman.

Constituents of the committee chairman are valuable allies. Encourage them to contact the committee chairman about your issue.

7. Evaluate Your Progress

Measure how far you have come.

Learn from mistakes.

Take stock of your best practices and use them again.

Ask these questions when your advocacy effort is in full swing:

Do we have a clear and concise message?

Is the response positive so far?

Are we building momentum and moving the issue forward?

Ask these when your advocacy effort has ended:

Did our message have an impact?

Did we educate people about the issue?

Did our audience see the effect we had?

Did we create change, even if only by incremental amounts?

Iowa PTA provides advocacy workshops at the annual state convention, and will conduct an advocacy workshop for your PTA at your location whenever it is convenient for you. Contact the PTA office for information.

For more information on advocacy, take National PTA's E-Learning course, *Effective Advocacy for Your Child*, at: http://www.pta.org/e_learning.asp

The username and password on your PTA membership card are required to access E-learning.

Tips for Advocating to Your Local School Board

Local school boards often are the most influential decision-making body affecting your child's education. They decide everything from what food is served at school lunch, to curriculum and graduation requirements, to where the new elementary school will be located and what students will attend it. Although every school district and state is different, if you want to get a policy changed, your best bet is to start with your local school board. The following are useful tips for working with your school board.

School board members are volunteers. Most school board members are elected, but they serve without pay because they care about education, and support themselves with other work. In this sense, you are not their "boss." In your interactions with board members always be respectful and polite, even when you disagree with a decision they have made.

Know your facts. Think of yourself as a resource to board members in helping them make decisions. If you want the school board to make a change, prepare a fact sheet that uses relevant research and statistics to back up your position. Be prepared to address the arguments against your position. Board members will appreciate that you have taken the time to fully think out your request and provided them with additional information. Not knowing your facts or being misinformed about an issue will weaken your argument.

Build support. Nothing will make a stronger impact on a school board than a room full of people supporting your cause. Start by talking to parents and PTA members about your issue. Holding an organizing meeting with a small group of people who care deeply about your issue can be very helpful. Plan who will speak to board members and who will testify at school board meetings. Keep in mind that only a few people should testify; the rest of the supporters are there to be visible reinforcement.

Be persistent. The old saying that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" is very true when it comes to school boards. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. If your school board does not seem to be addressing your issue, continue to press them in a variety of ways. Start by getting a group of people to show up at every school board meeting to keep the pressure on to discuss your issue. If this tactic does not work, start informing the public about the situation with letters to the local media or door-to-door canvassing. When taking a more aggressive approach, remember that it is even more important to keep a respectful and positive tone. Never verbally attack a board member. That approach can only hurt your cause.

You can make a difference in your child's education by working with your school board. When parents get involved, everyone wins.

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