

# PAA's State Legislature Advocacy Toolkit

*How YOU can have an impact on education policy  
in your district and school!*



## ■ Why get involved with your state legislature?

Many key decisions about public education are made at the state level. This includes overall school funding, learning goals, testing and accountability measures, school governance, student protections, personnel and teachers' union issues, and so on.

Your state most likely has a ***school code*** or specific set of laws that govern how your public schools operate. This school code can be changed (amended) at any time that laws are being voted on. If you are someone who likes that sort of thing, get a copy!

Legislators like to say that they are making laws based on what the people they represent want and need. When they make or amend school laws, they will generally hold ***hearings*** and invite people to present testimony for or against the proposal. Too often, public school parents are not included (and not informed) about these hearings. Parents are “represented” by one or two people who have the resources to be in the state capital for the hearings – often a state PTA president or, more recently, someone from a pseudo-parent group such as Stand for Children, (see our fact sheet, <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/SFC2017.pdf>) which receives generous funding from corporate interests to help grease the way for public school privatization.

***It's important for parents like you, with a real stake in the issues affecting public education, to have a voice in state education policy making!***

## ■ What are some of the basics to know before getting involved?

***Legislative Calendar:*** One of the most important things to know is your state legislative calendar. The calendar shows when the legislature is in session, deadlines for bills to be introduced, deadlines for amendments to be filed, last days for voting on bills, etc. Most state legislatures share this information on a web site.

***House and Senate:*** Most states have a bicameral (two-house) legislative system consisting of a House and a Senate. As with the U.S. Congress, a bill can be generated in either house, move through the committee structure of that house, be approved by that house, then be sent to the other house either for a vote or for amendment through a negotiated process between the two houses (called reconciliation).

**Committee structure:** In most cases, bills must be introduced in and approved by a committee before going to the state House or Senate. Your state legislature probably has an education committee which deals with education-related bills. It may have several education-related committees, such as education funding, or special committees set up for specific urgent tasks, such as school safety. Some proposals must go before more than one committee before going to the full House or Senate. There may also be an administrative committee that can decide to hold bills even if they have been approved by a subject area committee. The legislative web site will have a list of these committees and their membership, where you should also be able to find schedules of committee meetings and hearings.

**Other web-based tools:** Your state legislative web site may have a function that notifies you when a particular bill is up for consideration. Some state legislatures allow you to file online testimony and/or register support or opposition to a particular bill when it is being considered in committee, if you can't be there in person.

### ■ What are some of the best ways to have a voice in state school policy making?

**Know your representatives, and make sure they know you:** You will generally have the best chance of influencing your own state representatives. It doesn't take that much to make an impression on your House delegate, since their constituency is usually smaller than that of your state Senator. But in both cases, here are some things you can do to make sure that they begin to know who you are:

- Attend community events sponsored by or attended by your reps.
- Volunteer for activities sponsored by your rep's office. Make occasional **personal visits to their local offices**. Bring a relevant piece of information on a topic that is important to you. PAA has many fact sheets on our web site (<http://parentsacrossamerica.org/parent-resources/>) that you can choose from, or bring a current newspaper article or research report.
- Decide what you want to get out of the visit – if it's just a get-to-know-you, that's fine. Schmooze up the staff – this can be helpful along the way.
- Or, have a **specific ask** – whether it's a request for them to sponsor or co-sponsor a bill, for voting support for a bill, or that they consider an issue you bring to them for possible bill creation. Try to get a yes/no answer whenever you can.
- Make timely phone calls when bills you care about are up for a vote. Be sure to leave your name and address (so that they know you are a constituent) and ask for a specific commitment from your representative about how he/she will vote.
- Write letters.
- Just don't be a pest. Make sure you respect your representatives' time, while being clear about who they are working for.
- And – always, **always thank them** for voting the way you asked, for helping sponsor a bill you liked, etc. Do this in a personal call, letter or email and also publicly in your social media networks.

**Get to know the relevant education committee members:** If your rep is on the education committee, great. If not, you will need to make an extra effort to find education committee members who will pay attention to your concerns.

- Team up with like-minded parents whose reps are education committee members and go with them to visit the legislator.
- Write emails and make calls to the education committee members on a regular basis.
- When possible, make the effort to attend committee hearings on bills that are of the most concern to you. Legislators are impressed when you show up in the state capital.

**Get to know policy staff members:** Most state legislators have so much to keep track of and so many roles to fill that they hire staff to focus on specific areas. If your rep is on an education committee, he or she may have an education policy aide. In any case, there is usually one person responsible for keeping track of policy issues and helping the rep decide how to vote on various bills. You need to know that person.

- Ask the local office who handles education policy for your rep. Get their name and contact information.
- Be sure to share important information with your reps and their policy aides. They are not able to keep up with every issue. You have information that can help the aide do his or her job better, and help your rep make better decisions.

**Watch the state web site closely** to keep track of your bills, hearing dates, etc. As mentioned above, your state may have specific online notification tools.

## ■ Some more intensive ways to be involved

**Spend time in your state capital:** Visiting your state capital can be fun, educational, and productive. It can also be frustrating, exhausting, and unproductive!

- Decide what your goal/s are for the visit. It can be enough just to enjoy the atmosphere and educational experience.
- Many Capitol buildings will offer tours and informational brochures including member directories.
- Make sure you know the legislative schedule ahead of time so that you know whether or not your reps will be there.
- You could try to make an appointment with your rep, but their schedules while in session can be chaotic and unpredictable. You can talk to their office personnel to see what would be the best chance of getting a few minutes of the rep's time. Often the best way to meet up with them is to hang out around the assembly hall and run into them as they are going in or out.
- Have a business card made up with your name and other relevant information to hand to the rep or his/her staff. If you are there for a particular issue, have a one-page handout to give to them. (See PAA's extensive library of fact sheets - <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/parent-resources/> - on our web site.)

**Attend a legislative hearing:** A key way to have an impact on education policy is to attend or testify at a hearing on a specific bill that is important to you.

- Most hearings will be held at the state capital and will cover a number of bills at one time.
- However, if the issue affects one area of the state particularly, hearings may be held locally.
- In other cases, and for broader issues (such as school funding, testing programs, school safety, etc.), the committee or legislature may hold hearings in multiple locations across the state.
- People who wish to testify must generally sign up before the hearing. Sometimes this can be done online but is more often done in person during a period prior to the hearing.
- You can also simply sign in without intending to testify, (called an **appearance**). In signing in, you can indicate whether you are for or against the specific bill.
- Typically, members of a committee will invite a limited number of people who represent their side of the bill to testify. The number may be divided between political parties, for example, 3 on the side that's in control of the body, 2 on the other side.
- Usually it's the bureaucrats who speak first. The legislature has some oversight over these officials, so they may be especially interested in their testimony and have questions for them. These speakers are often given unlimited time, unlike us civilians.
- If you get a turn, you must keep your remarks brief. You may only have 2-3 minutes to speak.
- The smartest thing is to have several copies of your full written testimony, and then a short version with key bullet points to read as your oral testimony. Hand the full testimony to the legislative aide working the hearing. If there are reporters present, give them copies as well.
- Don't be surprised if they adjourn the hearing before you have had a chance to speak. That's another reason why it's a good idea to have written copies of your remarks to share.

**Legislative high-jumps:** If you have the time and resources, consider trying for one of the following:

- Get your rep to co-sponsor an existing bill that you support. The more co-sponsors a bill has, the better its chances of success.
- Get an education committee member to introduce a bill on a topic of concern to you and your community.
- Write a legislative proposal yourself. You may be able to find a pro bono lawyer with expertise in the field to help you. Also, most legislatures have staff whose job it is to turn ideas into legislative language.
- Run for office!!! Why not????