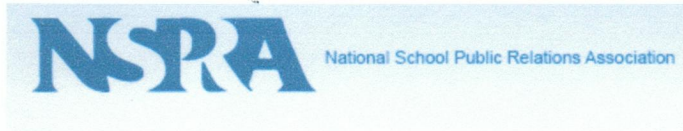


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Let Loose the Hounds: Preparing Parents to Be Your Legislative Advocates



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Most legislators and their legislative assistants closely monitor input from constituents. When the stack of phone messages, e-mails and other contacts hit a tipping point, an issue previously not on their radar screen suddenly becomes an issue of concern and one to follow.

For education-related issues, the move from “non-issue” to “front burner” can happen rapidly when the majority of the calls and e-mails to elected officials come from parents who live in their legislative areas. Legislators expect to hear from superintendents and other district leaders who earn salaries for monitoring

legislative activity. And while the administrative voice is important to the legislative and advocacy processes, it does not have as much clout as parent voices delivering a similar message.

Training and preparing your parents to assist as legislative advocates can have a tremendous payoff for your district and can quickly elevate your influence with legislators. A parent advocacy effort not only helps with legislative issues, but also creates a larger cadre of parents who understand and are engaged with your schools.

Creating Legislative Advocates

Most parents are not naturally attracted to the political or legislative side of education issues. It's fairly easy to pique their interest in classroom and school-based activities, but effort is needed to engage parents in issues that seem less related to what happens in their children's classrooms.

Begin building a cadre of parent advocates by sparking their interest in issues. Focus on a “what's in it for me” perspective so parents can see how a larger issue affects their children. For example, let's say your state is making budget reductions in education spending. When parents become aware of this, they probably won't act unless you tell them how the cuts will directly impact their children's schools. Now you have their attention.

Once parents are energized about a legislative issue, begin to build their advocacy skills. One of the first steps is expanding their knowledge base of legislative and education policy issues. “Information boot camps” are one way to immerse parents in key issues and provide them with the necessary background to communicate with elected officials. This information flow must be ongoing to continuously build understanding and equip parent advocates with the information they'll need.

Focusing on relationships is the next step in the process. It's easier for parents to gain access and respect from legislators, and the process is less intimidating if there is a personal connection. Your district can facilitate relationship-building by creating opportunities for parents to directly interact with legislators.

Finally, keep the process simple. While some parents may be willing and interested in diving deeply into the advocacy arena, most will

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