

# Advocacy

for School Board Members



Photo by Daniel

What happens in the State Capitol has increasing impact on the administration of our local public schools. Changes in labor or employment laws, new mandates and requirements on educational programs, and school funding and taxation issues all can significantly alter the way a school district operates and funds its programs.

An elected local school board member has the opportunity to influence and inform other constituents, including other elected officials, of successes, needs, and issues facing the local school district. School board members are elected by the same constituents that elect our State Senators and Representatives, and thus, a common bond and authority exists. As well, school administrators are key stakeholders in the educational system of Illinois. Their expertise should be shared with policy makers across the state so sound education policy can result.

To better shape education-related legislation, involvement by school board members in this civic process is imperative. Such stakeholders will be seen as a resource on education issues and a necessary component of providing good government.

In order to offer the expertise of school board members and school administrators, a relationship must be formed with local state senators and state representatives. Advocacy for public schools must include association legislative specialists working with legislators in the Capitol every session day and local school district management talking to legislators at home.

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### What do I need to know?

- What Legislative District do I live in?
- Who are my Senator and Representative?
- How can I contact them?
- Do we have a legislative group/committee in our district?
- Do I want to meet with legislators alone or with others?
- When are they in session?

### Forming Relationships with Legislators

- Set up a meeting with local legislators in the district office and offer to be a resource
- Maintain regular contact through the legislative session by visit, phone, email
- Acquaint yourself with legislative assistants in both the district and Springfield offices
- Join with neighboring districts and host a legislative breakfast
- Host a “Take a Legislator to School” day and invite local lawmakers into your schools
- Invite legislators to board meetings for dialogue on status of district
- Sponsor a local forum that includes legislators, community leaders, district leaders, etc. to discuss the “state of education” in Illinois.
- Send newsletters or board updates directly to the legislator on a regular basis
- Use your local media (newspapers and TV) to report on local school issues

## Honing Your Message

- Determine your message before the meeting — use brief talking points to stay on message
- Explain how pending legislation would affect your local school district
- Use data whenever possible that specifically addresses your school district
- No legislator can keep track of the status of all proposed legislation — be prepared to explain the bill’s components and know the status of the legislation
- Your word is your bond — always give honest, accurate information to further your position as a resource
- Inevitably you will find a situation on which you and your legislator cannot agree. Take this in stride as you will be approaching the legislator again on other topics
- Thank the legislator for taking time to discuss the issue



## Engaging the Community

### Identify the community

- Identify community organizations, groups, individuals that are crucial stakeholders in your district
- Recognize community groups or organizations that are in attendance at your board meeting
- Use social media to engage with grassroots advocates



### Build ongoing relationships with your community

- Express your appreciation to stakeholders for their support on specific issues
- Invite your community to key school functions such as graduation, sports events, and academic events
- Invite specific groups/organizations to board meetings and consider letting various groups make a short report to the board on their activities

### Build coalitions within the community

- Find various ways to inform your community about what is happening in your district
- Cultivate a group of local concerned citizens to act as “key communicators” or “ambassadors”
- Meet with local service organizations (Kiwanis, Rotary, Farm Bureau, etc.) to discuss education issues
- Meet with other local government entities (park district, library board, city council, etc.) to discuss common concerns and legislative issues affecting your district
- Use local media at all levels (newspaper, radio, television, webpages)

## What can I do as an individual?

- Stay informed of current education issues, legislation, and political happenings — IASB’s legislative reports summarize major legislative activities and bills of interest
- Meet with your legislators to discuss education issues
- Call and send emails to legislators before key issues are debated in the Capitol
- Reach out to neighboring school boards to share information

## What can we do as a board?

- Become involved in the legislative process
- Identify legislative priorities based on community needs and IASB resolutions
- Develop an advocacy plan based on district goals
- Identify community contacts
- Develop a working relationship with your legislators
- Let legislators know how issues and legislation impact their local districts
- Establish a legislative chair for your board
- Adopt board resolutions when public issues warrant a board response