



Education Voters
OF PENNSYLVANIA

EDUCATION ADVOCACY TOOL-KIT



**The Tools and Resources Needed to
Advocate for Public Education**

WHY EDUCATION MATTERS

Education is the backbone of our country and the foundation of our society. It provides individuals the opportunity acquire the American dream and makes impossible things possible. Recently, we are losing our edge in having the most cutting edge workforce and our economy leadership is weakening. With financial cuts backs due to the economic recession, funding for public education has been slashed. The reality is that students of today are receiving less than the students of yesterday though are expected to achieve more. Investing in public education is not only an investment in our future workforce, but an investment in our economy and our community.

Education and the Economy

There is a direct relationship between a good education and national economic gains. Research has shown that the effects of poor education drain the nation's economy which directly impacts our nation as we recover from a severe economic downturn. Education's effect on the economy can be seen in regards to national revenue, government spending and worker productivity. A quality education is vital to our future economy and workforce and is a necessary investment. Achieving an excellent education system is imperative in ensuring sustainable economic recovery.

Education and Crime

Education is critical in ensuring our nation's success. Unfortunately, our education system is not fully providing the resources needed for every child to have an opportunity to learn. Recent studies indicate that a poor education can lead to a steep increase in criminal behavior and the expense of incarcerating an individual greatly outweighs the cost of providing an education for the same person. During a time when crime prevention and a decrease in spending are high on the political agenda, investing in education policy simply makes sense. Receiving an adequate education is a civic right and a matter of public safety.

Opportunity to Learn

Obtaining a quality education is a human and civil right. Every child in Pennsylvania deserves an opportunity to learn, but unfortunately, some students are being denied that right. Organizations and coalitions across the Commonwealth are working together to fight for policies that are proven to work and to increase funding in these programs so that Pennsylvania's student achievement will continue to increase and the achievement gap between high- and low-income students will decrease.

WHY ADVOCACY IS IMPORTANT

What is Advocacy and Why Do It?

Advocacy makes issues relevant to politicians and brings the issues back home to their district. Elected officials play a significant role in our society and the laws they create directly influence our day-to-day lives. However, legislators may be unaware of the issues that impact our communities, especially our schools. Or they may not realize how important an issue is to the community. It is through community members advocating for better education policy and adequate funding that we can see an impact on pending and future laws.

Your Participation is Critical

Politicians work for YOU and they need to HEAR from you. Legislators won't know your views on issues unless you tell them. Young children are unable to

WHY GET INVOLVED

advocate on their own behalf...we must REPRESENT OUR FUTURE by standing up for them NOW.

Together We Are More Effective and Impactful

EVPA works with organizations across the Commonwealth engaging in education policy and we want to work with YOU. By working together we are able to use resources more effectively and have more of an impact in Harrisburg. Together we can show that education is not a parent or teacher issue, it's a community issue.

Why Now?

It is always time for advocacy; without constant dialogue with our legislators, decisions will be made and legislation will be passed without our input or our consideration. This not good for public education or our students.

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PA EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education is primarily a State and Local Responsibility

Federal Role: Provides funding for special populations of students, such as students with disabilities, low-income students and English language learners to protect the educational rights of these groups.

State Role: Focuses on setting policies that outline a framework for the operation of schools, such as high school graduation requirements and teacher certification regulations.

Local Districts Role: Operate schools and determine policy for curriculum and instruction.

Pennsylvania Constitution

Section 14: Public School System: "The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth.

Pennsylvania Education System

State Legislature: Enacts rules and regulations concerning public education. These laws can be found in the school code. State legislature created the PA Department of Education, the State Board of Education And the local school districts to share the power over

education. These bodies are controlled by the state legislature

Pennsylvania Department of Education: Has no rule-making power or authority but can interpret statutes and rules when allowed. The department enforces state regulations created by the PA State Board of Education.

State Board of Education: Is given rule-making powers by the State legislature and adopts statewide regulations that affect all school districts. The board consist of 21 members who serve 6 yr terms; 14 are appointed by the Governor and approved by the Senate and 4 are members of the House and Senate Education Committees.

Local School Districts: There are 500 school districts in Pennsylvania, each with an elected board consisting of 9 members (except Philadelphia) who are elected by the voters residing in the school district. These positions are unpaid. Local school districts also have rule-making powers granted to them by the State Legislature. Duties of the board ARE to adopt rules and regulations governing teachers and students; determine school budget and set the TAX RATE (also known as millage) to be levied; hire teachers and contract for various services; chose textbooks and establish curriculum.

EDUCATION FUNDING IN PA

Sources of Public School Funding

Across the nation, the state's share of school funding averages around 48%. In Pennsylvania, the average is only 36%. Pennsylvania ranks 4th in the nation with regard to dependence on local taxes to support public education

History of Education Funding

In 1965, the General Assembly enacted a law requiring the state to pay at least 50% of the total cost of public education. The State's contribution peaked at 55% in 1974.

In 1983, a new formula is enacted that repeals the 50% funding guarantee. This new formula distributes funding based on average actual cost to educate children but this was ignored. From 1975 to 2006, the State's share in funding declines every year, reaching a low of 36% in 2006. Many local school districts are

forced to make up the difference and raise taxes. Despite increases in student enrollment, district's funding was either frozen or decreased.

In 2006, the General Assembly commissioned a Costing-out Study which determined that the average annual funding needed per student in PA was \$11,926, \$2,414 MORE than what was currently being spent. A new funding formula was enacted in 2008, which took into account the needs of the students and the number of students in a school to determine the cost.

Historic Funding Cuts to Public Education

In 2011, public K-12 education received an historic funding cut of over \$900 million. These cuts fell hardest on school districts with the greatest student poverty and also resulted to higher property taxes and the elimination of programs that are proven to be successful such as full-day kindergarten and tutoring.

ADVOCACY TOOLS

TIPS FOR LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

“How-To” Tips to Legislative Advocacy

Build a relationship and get to know your legislators:

1. Introduce yourself to elected officials at public events.
2. Don't be a stranger to your elected officials and their staff. Familiar faces are more persuasive than unfamiliar ones. Keep ongoing communications.
3. Always say thank you and be polite, even if you disagree with your elected official's position on issues. Be direct, but always respectful.
4. Learn more about your elected official by doing research on his/her political party, the legislative committees he/she serves, any leadership position they might serve, their voting record and any personal facts such as civic work in the community.

How to get your message across.

1. Clearly define the issue your issue. Be concise and to the point; stating your views in a few sentences. The key to influence is not volume, but precision.
2. If possible, state a solution along with the problem.
3. Be able to discuss how your issue affects your community, family, organization or workplace.
4. Put a face on your issue. Give a real life example of the issue.



Stay in Informed.

1. Sign up for Education Voter's email list to stay updated on current events regarding state education policy.
2. Read your local newspaper, listen to local radio news shows, and watch your local TV news
3. Attend your local school district meetings and local community events.

Stick with it!

1. Change does not occur overnight; consistent participation is essential for long-term success.
2. Legislators who voted against one issue, may be a strong supporter of another issue.

The First Five Steps to Getting Involved:

- Sign up for updates at www.EducationVotersPA.org
- Learn more about education issues and what is happening in Harrisburg by visiting our website and joining our Facebook and Twitter pages.
- Commit to calling your legislators at least twice and tell them why public education is important to you.
- Talk to your neighbors and friends about the importance of public education and identify people who can join this effort.
- Spread the word - we are available to speak at your next meeting (parent group, civic association, etc.) or if you want to pull some people together yourself.

ADVOCACY TOOLS

HOW TO CALL YOUR LEGISLATOR

This is an effective way to make your voice heard. It's easy and doesn't take much time.

Why Do It?

Many legislators want to know what the public considers important. They will be very interested in your opinion if you voted for them or not. Even if you don't always see eye to eye with your representative, it is still valuable for them, and for your community, to know what your priorities are, what you care about and what you'll pay attention to.

Remember: a good quality public education and the impact it has on our economy is supported by the vast majority of Pennsylvanians, regardless of political party. There is support for strong public education among political representatives and leaders of both parties as well. Calling Representatives, Democratic and Republican, is a way to show them that once the campaigns are over, they need to pay attention to all constituents and the prosperity of the entire Commonwealth.

A Call Is Easy and Goes Something Like This

- Introduce yourself and identify yourself as a constituent.
- State your topic and say WHAT you care about, SUPPORT or OPPOSE, WHY
- Give an example of your personal experience when possible.
- ASK for a FOLLOW UP RESPONSE

Example of a Phone Call Script

Hi this is Susan Pennsylvanian, I am a constituent of Representative Handshaker, and I am calling because I strongly support public education and I am very concerned about the impact of budget cuts on my school, and on our community.

The person answering your call will say something like: *I'd be glad to take your information, the Representative isn't available right now, but we want to know your opinion/care about hearing from people in the community.*

[Example of something specific]: My 2nd grader's class went from 22 to 28 kids this year, and I think that is nuts! The kids are getting less individual attention, and I just don't agree that this is the right solution to a state budget problem – we can't cut education, it is the thing that will re-build our economy! Instead of looking at gimmicky and unproven reforms (like vouchers) I really think we need to figure out how to deliver a high quality education to every child.

The issue of public education is my top issue as a voter and taxpayer!

I am interested in the Representative's position on these cuts (or other issues that you are interested in) and would like to hear back about it. My address/email/phone is.... Thank you.

A few tips:

• **Be really pleasant to the staff.** They take a lot of calls, often from people who are upset about things (and some from people who just like to complain). We suggest thinking of it as a conversation you might have at work or a meeting: keep the tone professional and courteous, make your point about the issue.

• **Try to sound like yourself.** It is okay to prepare notes to remind yourself what you are calling to say, but try not to read something. Share your sincere personal opinion and your reasons for it, in your own words.

• **Keep it short:** a 2-3 minute call is usually plenty to say WHAT you SUPPORT (or oppose), WHY, and to give your contact information and ask for a response.

• **Don't expect to speak to the Representative,** unless you know them personally. The staff is supposed to take your calls. At some point you may want to consider asking for a personal meeting, but that doesn't always happen right away; meanwhile working with staff can be a good way to start making contact with the office and put your issues on their radar.

• **PLAN TO CALL from time to time! It isn't like voting – you can do it more than once!** Check in, let them know you are following the issue, talking to people in your community and will circle back from them as events develop.

ADVOCACY TOOLS

VISITING YOUR LEGISLATOR

A Step-by-Step Guide to Meeting with your Legislator

Step 1 – To identify your legislator, go to www.EducationVotersPA.org to look up their contact info (available on our homepage). All you need to do is enter your address information. After submitting this information, the names of your representatives will appear. You can click on their names for more information, including district office and Harrisburg contact info and committee assignments.

Step 2 – To schedule a meeting, call their local district office and tell the receptionist that you are a constituent and would like to schedule a meeting at the district office. The staff person or scheduler will ask you what you'd like to discuss; just give them a clear, succinct answer such as "education cuts", "school vouchers" or anything else you wish to talk about.

Step 3 – To prepare for your meeting, go to www.EducationVotersPA.org to download some key points on current education issues. **The key to a successful legislative meeting is to demonstrate why an issue is important to you.** You don't have to be an "expert". You can use the materials that EVPA provides to have a few good facts or statistics ready, but personal stories/experience is always the best approach when you are speaking as a constituent. The most important component is to have a clear "ask" (something specific you'd like them to do); a good example would be: "reject the proposed education cuts and examine additional revenue options, such as taxing Marcellus Shale, smokeless tobacco and ending special tax breaks and corporate loopholes".

Step 4 – Legislators are very busy, so make sure to arrive on time or a little early for your meeting. It is not uncommon that you will end up speaking with staff; if so, just proceed as you normally would because the staff person will report back to the legislator. Check the side bar for a few tips to consider during your meeting.

Step 5 – Follow up: sometime during the first few days after the meeting, send a letter thanking them for their time, briefly recap what was discussed and reiterate any follow up items (ex. send along any additional info you may have wanted to provide but did not have at the time; remind them of/thank them for any important commitments or statements they made).

- **Be prepared:** think of a personal story you can tell to make your point and bring 1 or 2 supporting facts
- **Be friendly:** don't get heated, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar
- **Be open:** be sure to listen, not just speak
- **Be informed:** make sure you feel comfortable with a couple of points about the issue.
- **Give examples:** again, personal stories and experience are very persuasive
- **Don't argue:** just approach this as presenting a case, not necessarily winning an argument
- **Don't apologize:** you can hold your ground while still being polite; do not back down, remember you are speaking for your kids and your school
- **Don't get sidetracked:** stay with the topic at hand and stay on message
- **Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know:** you don't have to be an expert, legislators are not experts on everything either. Find common ground: talk about overarching values if you don't agree on specific actions; if nothing else, you can at least agree that legislator should care about the concerns of their constituents.
- **Don't give up:** follow up and stay in touch

ADVOCACY TOOLS

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor are responses to either a current event or a recent article you read. They are a way for you to share your opinion to your community. Below are tips on how to write and submit a letter to the editor.

What to say

- Letters are more likely to be considered if they refer to a recent article or recent event. If you are referring to a recent article, state the date and headline.
- Familiarize yourself with talking points Education Voters provides on their website on various educational issues.
- Stick to the basic issue and be timely and local.

How to Say It

- Be brief and to the point. Your letter should be no more than 200-250 words, with no more than three paragraphs.
- Use 1-2 relevant facts when possible to support your point
- If responding to another author, do not attack your author in your letter. Instead present your argument by comparing and contrasting your views from the previous author.

Tips

- Include your name, address, email and phone number. The newspaper will contact you to confirm you are who you are.
- If your letter is published, wait a month before submitting another letter.

Sample Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor

I am writing in concern of recent budget cuts to public education. At my local school, full-day kindergarten was cut from full-day to half-day. This affected over 100 families in our area and I am sure it was the same in other districts. This puts a financial burden on my family that we were not anticipating. I am concerned about the loss of learning time and preparation for grade school with only half-day kindergarten; the kids will not be as far along as they would have been with full-day. I feel the state legislature needs to understand that education, especially early education, is an important and necessary investment in our community, our future workforce and our economy as a whole.

Sincerely,
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This document was produced by Education Voters of Pennsylvania, a non-profit, non-partisan organization focused on engaging community members in the policy process across the Commonwealth.

We're here to help you get involved in the policy process, understand the issues and provide the tools necessary for you to advocate effectively.

