



Advocacy Toolkit

A "HOW-TO" GUIDE TO POWERFUL EDUCATION ADVOCACY



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ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: INTRODUCTION

Foreword

At every school board meeting, you make decisions that impact the lives of children in your community. As district leaders, you have the ultimate responsibility to the students in your schools, their parents and the community you serve – which is why a school board member's role as an advocate for public education is a fundamental responsibility of every school board member.

As an education leader, you have firsthand understanding of your district's needs, and how those needs ensure the best education for South Dakota's public school children. You have an important message to deliver to your state and federal representatives, the media and your local community. And, as those locally elected to see to the education of children in your community, you have the political clout to influence both state and national public policy.

Why is your advocacy so important?

Your advocacy efforts are critical because there is a growing need to deliver our message: The education of South Dakota's children must be the top priority of our state's policymakers. While many districts face declining enrollments and shrinking budgets, our leaders in the Legislature must understand how the decisions they make impact children in your district. The need to take an active role in the broader political arena is given added importance by recent movements to usurp local decision making in favor of one-size-fits-all, state-level mandates. More than ever, it is imperative for school board members to lead the way in advocating for public education.

Can you really make an impact?

Absolutely. The Governor and State Legislators have to make hundreds of decisions during their time in Pierre, and they make decisions

based on the information available. They listen to their constituents back home, particularly those who have knowledge in the area they are advocating for. You are on the front lines of education and can explain the real-life impact of state-level policy decisions. The kind of information is invaluable to legislators – and it is persuasive. You are also a leader in your community, sharing an electoral base with your legislators.

In particular, your efforts to communicate with your legislators – either face-to-face or in the form of insightful, personal letters or emails – and the extent to which you express your opinions in local media outlets – in the form of letters-to-the-editor, opinion editorials and articles – make the most difference.

In fact, the impact local district leaders can have in the policy making process is why the Associated School Boards of South Dakota strongly encourages local school board members to deliver advocacy messages to the Legislature. ASBSD has established a grassroots advocacy group, called the Legislative Action Network (LAN), to keep local district leaders informed and ready to advocate.

Using this guide to maximize your impact

Effective grassroots lobbying isn't difficult – it simply requires time. There are several time-tested activities that allow you to make your voice heard. From setting up meetings with local legislators, to writing letters-to-the-editor, this tool kit will show you some simple tools to focus your political power. Once you have familiarized yourself with this tool kit, the next step is to make a commitment to advocacy.

Remember: advocacy efforts are a fundamental responsibility of school board members. Your efforts can make yet another positive difference in the education of our nation's schoolchildren.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: **ARE YOU INFLUENTIAL?**

Personable, Persuasive & Credible

Good advocacy is about influencing people to make decisions favorable to your positions. Once you understand how the lobbying process works, board members will be better able to persuade lawmakers and the Governor to agree with your views.

1. What is a persuasive argument for a legislator? The legislative process is intended to be a problem solving process. If a bill establishes a significant reason to solve a problem it has a good chance of passing. Alternatively, if your goal is to kill a bill, a good argument is to show why there is no problem to solve or it does more harm than good.
2. Persuasion completely rests on the credibility of the speaker. If a legislator trusts you, they are more likely to believe you. The relationship you have with a lawmaker will determine the level of trust they have and thus the degree to which you will be persuasive. It's all about being credible.
3. Legislators like a good story. A good strategy is to argue for your position with a real world example to make

your point. Your story can be even more effective if the legislator can relate to it. Perhaps it's an example from your community, or has a personal connection to the legislator.

4. Limit your arguments using statistics. Stats can be used, but sparingly. Legislators hear thousands of numbers, but the only figures that really matter are those that are reliable and show significant impact.
5. Always be truthful. Avoid exaggerating an issue, legislators will see through that. It hurts your credibility.
6. Look for common ground in a solution. Your willingness to find an answer increases trust and credibility. It takes work to find compromise.
7. Persuasive people never give up on a legislator, so be persistent. Legislators may change their mind on an issue several times because they are constantly lobbied by many sides. Your goal should be to be the first to inform them with information, and be the last to make your point. That means you must communicate with them throughout the process.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: ARE YOU INFLUENTIAL?

Tips for Effective Grassroots Lobbying

Boards must be involved in the political process.

The board should:

1. Identify legislative priorities.
2. Develop an advocacy plan.
3. Identify supportive community contacts.
4. Develop key messages.
5. Communicate these messages to state and local decision makers.

Make sure your legislative delegation knows what is going on in your district

The board should:

1. Ask them to visit schools.
2. Let them know how legislation will impact the district.
3. Develop a positive relationship for the long haul.

Building Positive Relationships with Your Legislators Is the Key to Success.

There is the old saying that, "All politics is local" and it is true. Building positive relationships with your legislative delegation at home in your school district will help you effectively communicate the needs of your district to your legislative delegation. Success is dependent on good relationships.

Lobbying Tips for School Board Members

1. Foster a positive relationship with your legislator(s). Make sure your legislators know your names and information about your school district.
 - a. Meet with your legislator prior to the session on a one to one basis. Research shows that this is the most effective lobbying technique.
 - 1) Get to know them on a personal level- ask about family, children, schools, interests, etc.
 - 2) Tell your legislator(s) you appreciate their support for your school district.
 - 3) Tell them what is important to your school district.
 - 4) Tell them positive stories about what is happening in your school district.
 - 5) Tell them what you are doing with any new funding you have received from the legislature.
 - 6) Tell them what you need to accomplish your goals.

2. Encourage your legislator to seek your opinion on educational issues.
 - a. Let your legislator know you are willing to provide information on educational issues.
 - b. Be willing to share your insight and experience as a school board member on the issues the legislator(s) will have to vote on.
 - c. Be willing to put together information that is needed by your legislator(s).
 - d. Call ASBSD or access the web to find material needed on issues.
 - e. Give your legislator your home, work, and fax numbers and your e-mail address so he or she can contact you easily before a vote.
 - f. Use the school district's expertise on issue you are not familiar or comfortable with.
 - g. Be familiar with the ASBSD position on bills. Speaking with a unified voice helps your legislator(s) know where there is support for issues.
3. Hold your legislator accountable for votes, public statements and actions.
 - a. Attend any meeting your legislator(s) hold in your community.
 - b. Ask your legislator(s) questions if you don't understand an issue or why your legislator(s) voted one way or another.

(Adapted from materials provided by the Iowa and Texas Association of School Boards)

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: ARE YOU INFLUENTIAL?

Practical Communications Tips

(adapted from Texas Association of School Boards)

To communicate effectively with legislators, certain guidelines apply no matter where you meet.

Do these:

Establish a reputation for reliability and credibility.

Identify yourself: Make sure the legislator understands who you are and which school district you represent.

Be brief: Get to the point quickly, and be specific.

Know what you're talking about: Explain the facts, and understand the opposition's point of view.

Use a local angle: Explaining how a bill will positively or negatively affect the local school district can be very persuasive. Remember that you're not only the legislator's constituent; you're also a fellow elected official.

Show respect: Be positive. Remember to compliment the legislator's successes, and thank him or her. Although you are both elected officials, some legislators may follow an unspoken sense of hierarchy between local and state representatives, statewide officials, and federal elected officers.

Communicate often: Be friendly. Keep in touch with legislators year-round, not just during the legislative session when you want something. Invite your elected representatives to attend school board meetings, special events, workshops, and other events.

Recognize effort: Thank legislators in writing when they vote as you asked. Let lawmakers know their support on your district's behalf is appreciated.

Thank legislators for meeting with you and for their support or consideration, even if they are against you: You may need their vote in the future on another matter.

Consider compromise: Stake out your position, but if a legislator makes a reasonable request or offers an alternative to the position, take the compromise into consideration.

Choose battles wisely: Decide from the start if an issue is important enough to risk ruining a personal relationship with a legislator or whether you would rather keep the relationship long-term and let the issue go.

Notify the legislator of a deadline: When writing lawmakers, tell them where the bill you're writing about is in the process and when action is scheduled. Give legislators all the information you can to make it easier for them to support your position.

Be sensitive to partisan politics: But, always try to come across as nonpartisan.

Use correct forms of addresses: Always address legislators as Representative X, or Senator Y.

Print out your fact sheets, letters, and testimony: Date them. Be sure they include how you can be reached.

Be reasonable: Everyone thinks his or her issue is the most important one being considered.

Know other issues or problems the legislator is working on: Help him or her when you can.

Offer to be a resource for specific information related to the district.

Look for friends in unusual places: In politics, a friend—Republican, Democrat, liberal, or conservative—works with you on a specific issue even if he or she opposes you on every other issue.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: ARE YOU INFLUENTIAL?

Practical Communications Tips

(adapted from Texas Association of School Boards)

To communicate effectively with legislators, certain guidelines apply no matter where you meet.

Don't do these:

Don't be rude: Threats, rudeness, or other inappropriate behavior will not help your cause.

Don't be bullied: Don't let yourself be intimidated by legislators' authority or status. But recognize and respect their responsibilities.

Don't underestimate legislators: With rare exceptions, they are honest and intelligent and want to do the right thing.

Don't distort the facts: Present your position honestly and thoughtfully. If you don't know the answer to a legislator's question, say so. Then find the information and call back as soon as possible.

Don't assume the legislator or staff member has read or remembers something you sent: Lawmakers and their staffs are inundated with volumes of information. So, if you have something you want read, make it brief. It's also a good idea to give copies to the legislator's aide, who will probably be the one who reviews the submission.

Don't break a promise: If you tell the legislator you will get information or that you will do something in exchange for support, follow through.

Don't change your position: If the legislator has publicly committed to a position you encouraged, don't change your mind about it later, unless the bill was significantly amended or local circumstances have changed. Let your legislator know how the bill has changed and why your position has modified. Recommend he or she does the same.

Don't give inaccurate information.

Don't make moral judgments based on a vote or an issue.

Don't begin by saying, "As a citizen and taxpayer...."

Don't send form letters.

Don't write members of the House when the vote is in the Senate, and vice versa.

Don't ignore your legislator, and then contact one from another district for help with your issue.

Don't complain publicly or privately about your legislator.

Don't hold grudges or give up.

Don't interrupt legislators when they are obviously busy.

Don't cover more than one subject in a contact.

Don't write a letter longer than one page.

Don't press for an answer on your first visit.

Don't blame legislators for all the things that go wrong in government.

Don't be offended if he or she forgets your name or who you are, even if it is just five minutes after your visit.

Don't assume that education is at the top of the legislator's priority list.

Don't cut anyone off from contact. Don't let a legislator consider you an enemy because you disagree. Today's adversary could be tomorrow's ally.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT:

THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Overview:

You may often hear legislators and other state officials reference a piece of legislation that is making its way through the “political process.” The “political process” refers to an undetermined amount of time – some concepts are realized over several years, while some ideas gain momentum so quickly it’s hard to keep track.

In South Dakota, the Legislature meets each year. In recent years sessions have been 38 days in length. With the myriad of legislative rules and procedures, willing advocates will have to pay close attention – action on a particular bill comes quickly, particularly toward the end of session when the most influential education policy decisions are typically made.

By knowing how the “political process” works, you can determine when and how to most effectively influence the decisions made by the Legislature.

How a bill becomes law

Each bill takes a predictable path through the process. Essentially, the process goes like this:

Introduction of a bill:

A member of the Legislature introduces a new piece of legislation. A bill can be introduced in either **chamber**, and is sometimes the same concept is included in different bills and introduced in both the **House of Representatives** (House) and the **Senate**. Each bill is given a number – bills introduced in the House start with HB, and are given a number in the thousands; bills introduced in the Senate start with SB, and are given a number that starts in the single digits.

Referral to committee

Once a bill is introduced, the **legislative leadership** assigns the bill to the appropriate **committee** for consideration. The committee schedules each piece of legislation for a hearing. During the **hearing**, both supporters (referred to as proponents) and opponents of the bill are given time to **testify** on the bill.

Once the bill has had a hearing, the committee closes testimony and takes action on a bill in one of the following ways:

- » **Do Pass** – A recommendation by the committee that their fellow legislators support the legislation during subsequent steps in the process.
- » **Defer to the 41st Legislative Day** - Removes the bill from the process by postponing consideration to a fictional day on the Legislative Calendar.
- » **Refer** – If one committee believes that another committee should weigh in on a bill before it reaches the floor for vote, committee members may vote to refer the bill to another committee, essentially transferring authority of the bill to another committee. For example, most bills that require legislative appropriation are referred to the appropriations committee before the floor debates the issue.
- » **Table** – Members of the committee can vote to table the legislation, which means they can bring the bill back up for consideration at a later date.
- » **Consent Calendar** – If a bill receives a unanimous vote by a committee, the committee can move to have the bill placed on the consent calendar, which is similar to the consent agenda you see at your local board meetings.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Floor Action

Once a bill makes it out of committee, the bill is voted upon by the membership of the House or Senate. Vote on the floor include:

- » **Do Pass** – In general, a bill has to receive an affirmative vote from the floor to be move through the process (some bills, such as appropriations, need to receive a two-thirds majority). If a piece of legislation fails to receive a majority vote, it is considered failed, and its journey thorough the legislative process comes to an end.
- » **Table** – A decision to table stalls the bill in the legislative process, and the concept may or may not be revisited.

Special Circumstances:

Sometimes legislators invoke legislative procedures from the floor, including:

- » **Move to Reconsider** – No matter whether a vote has passed or failed, a legislator can move to have the bill reconsidered, meaning the bill will come up for vote again at a later date. Moving to reconsider gives legislators time to persuade other legislators to vote for or against the proposed measure.
- » **Smokeout** – If a bill was killed in the committee, an individual legislator can use a legislative procedure, commonly

referred to as a smokeout, to give the full body a chance to vote on the measure.

Moving On

A bill has to move through both the House and the Senate before it can be forwarded to the Governor for consideration. For example, if a bill is introduced in the House, makes it through committee and passed the House floor, it moves on to the Senate and goes through the process again.

If both the House and the Senate pass a bill out, it moves on to the Governor. At that point, the Governor can sign it, allow it to become law without signing it, or veto the bill.

Conference Committees

Sometimes the House and the Senate disagree on how to handle a particular issue. In that case, a bill moves to **conference committee**, where representatives from each chamber work to resolve the matter. The conference committee report then moves on to the floor of each chamber for a vote.

You can track key bills during legislative session through ASBSD's Bill Tracker, found at <http://asbsd.org/index.php/services/billtracker-2/>.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: KNOW YOUR LEGISLATORS

Getting to know your legislators

Taking the time to assemble information about your legislators is an important step to take before you contact them. The more you know about the individual you are talking to, the better prepared you are to make arguments that they will respond to. Here are some pieces of information to collect about your representatives before you contact them.

Committee Assignments

Take special note of the committees your legislator serves on, and the impact their service may have on achieving your advocacy objectives. For example, if a legislator from your district is on an education committee, they play a key role in nearly all education legislation that is introduced in a given year. If a legislator in your district is on the appropriations committee, he or she will be a critical player in the battle to increase education funding.

» **TIP:** Access a biography of legislators by visiting the Legislative Research Council web site – <http://www.sdlegislature.gov/Legislators/> and then select your legislator.

However, remember that it is important to keep all members advised on education issues. Ultimately, every member has a vote.

Voting Records

Knowing how your legislators voted on key education issues will give you an idea of where each is likely to stand on the issue at hand. It may also help you shape your arguments.

Personal Information

Knowing some personal tidbits about your legislators can help you establish ties. Did they attend public school in your district? Are they a former school board member? Do they have a background in education? What do they do for a living? Do they have children in school? Do they attend public, or private school?

Any information you can gather may help you establish a relationship.

Location of Local Crackerbarrels

Many legislators establish local crackerbarrels during session. Crackerbarrels are the legislators' attempt to gather community input on legislation during session. Typically, crackerbarrels are set up on Saturday mornings. Make sure to find out where your legislators hold their crackerbarrels, and plan to attend during session. Crackerbarrels are a great opportunity for face-to-face interaction during session.

ASBSD prepares a list of legislative crackerbarrels each year and posts it on our website's blog, found at <http://asbsd.org/index.php/blog/>.

Committees that Impact Education

There are several issues beyond traditional education programs that impact education. In addition to legislation on education programs and funding, education advocates may pay close attention to taxation laws and local government issues. So, when looking to see if your legislators are on "key" committees, keep in mind the following committees that are important for public schools.

- » House and Senate Education – handle a good majority of education-related legislation.
- » House and Senate Appropriations – has budgetary authority for all state dollars.
- » House and Senate Local government considers the authority of local government entities.
- » House and Senate Local government – considers the authority of local government entities.
- » House and Senate Taxation – considers taxation issues.
- » House and Senate Retirement Laws – reviews the laws relating to the South Dakota retirement system.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

Make Your Voice Heard in Pierre

Legislative session goes by quickly, and legislators place value on clear, concise and informative communication from education advocates. School leaders are in a good position to know which laws work and don't work in public schools. The following pages detail proven means of effectively communicating with your legislators.

Crafting the Message

Communicating with your legislator through a phone call or email is important. So, what should your message say?

1. The message must be clear and focused on the issue you wish to talk about. Keep it on one topic and be sure it's a focused message.
2. Give the legislator 2 or 3 strong arguments or reasons to vote a particular way.
3. Use bullet points if you are emailing. Keep them brief, but understandable.
4. Support your reasons for the points with specific examples your legislator can relate to. Make the examples personal if you can.
5. Don't use language that puts down the legislature, Governor, or government. Keep it positive.
6. Think of your message as if it were to become a two minute speech the lawmaker could give on the Senate or House floor. What should your legislator say to the rest of the legislative body?
7. Thank them for their time and ask them for their vote.

Writing your Legislators

Personal, thoughtful letters have an impact on your legislators. As a school leader, the most effective way to write your legislator is as a representative of your entire board; however, individual letters are the next best. To make certain that letters can be written in a brief time frame, have a school board policy in place authorizing a point person on the board

to write on behalf of the board or for the board president's signature.

When writing your letters, keep in mind:

1. Focus on one issue or bill per letter, and identify the bill by name and number.
2. Express your point of view and explain why your legislator should be supportive. Be brief and courteous.
3. Briefly explain the local impact of the legislation – just the facts.
4. Request that your legislator take a specific position on the bill.
5. Ask for a response from your legislator.
6. When writing an individual letter, use your signature and personal letterhead, and state that you are a board member. If you are writing a collective letter written by the board, have the president of the board sign it and put it on the board's letterhead.
7. Make sure your return address is on the letter (envelopes often get lost) so that your legislator can respond. Since you may be working in a short time frame, provide your e-mail address or phone number as an avenue for return communication.

E-mailing

Letters may be ideal when the Legislature isn't in session, but e-mailing your legislators make for quicker communication during session. E-mail is the quickest form of communication, and it allows you to copy several people at the same time. For instance, you can e-mail your legislator, and CC your fellow board members and ASBSD.

- » **TIP:** The Legislative Research Council keeps the most accurate, up-to-date list of legislator contact information. Visit <http://www.sdlegislature.gov/Legislators/> to access a list of individual legislators (clicking on their name reveals their contact information).
- » **TIP:** When e-mailing your legislator, make sure to include the fact that you are a school board member from your school district in the subject line.

SAMPLE: Letter

On school district letterhead

*Senator (Representative) Sam Sample
South Dakota Legislature
500 East Capitol Ave
Pierre, SD 57501*

*Dear Senator (Representative) Sam Sample:
(If you know your legislator personally, use their first name).*

I am a school board member from SD Town School District. On behalf of my district, I urge you to support adequate funding for public education, as outlined in Senate Bill 120.

As you may be aware, SD Town School District has already opted-out of the tax limitation, and we have still had to cut more than \$1 million from our budget over the past four years. This past year, for example, we were forced to eliminate several positions, including a guidance counselor, a curriculum development professional and a social worker. In the past several years, we have been prevented from implementing several programs we believe would have a direct impact on student achievement, including additional professional development for staff and expanded after school tutoring for the students who need additional teacher contact time. [include your district's personal info].

Thank you for your leadership in support of public education. I look forward to your response.

*Sincerely,
Pat Smith
President,
SD Town School Board
605-555-5555*

SAMPLE: E-mail

To: Senator (Representative) Sam Sample

CC: SD Town Board Members, SD Town Superintendent, ASBSD Representative

SUBJECT: SD Town School Board Member – Support SB 120

*Dear Senator (Representative) Sam Sample:
(If you know your legislator personally, use their first name).*

I am a school board member from SD Town School District. On behalf of my district, I urge you to support adequate funding for public education, as outlined in Senate Bill 120.

As you may be aware, SD Town School District has already opted-out of the tax limitation, and we have still had to cut more than \$1 million from our budget over the past four years. This past year, for example, we were forced to eliminate several positions, including a guidance counselor, a curriculum development professional and a social worker. In the past several years, we have been prevented from implementing several programs we believe would have a direct impact on student achievement, including additional professional development for staff and expanded after school tutoring for the students who need additional teacher contact time. [include your district's personal info].

Thank you for your leadership in support of public education. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

*Pat Smith
President,
SD Town School Board
605-555-5555*

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

» Legislators may get hundreds of e-mails a day, and referencing your identity in the subject line will help them recognize the importance of the e-mail.

Calling Your Legislators

Phone calls are an effective and fast way to communicate with your legislators, especially when a critical vote is coming up. In fact, a personal phone call is the only time you can make sure a legislator has received your advocacy message. Phone calls remind legislators that you are closely monitoring their votes. If you call your legislator and do not reach them, leave a message, but be sure to follow up with an e-mail or fax that states your position.

When phoning a legislator, keep the following in mind:

1. Ask to speak with the legislator directly, or briefly state your position to the person taking the message.
2. Give your name, title and school district.
3. Focus on one issue or bill. Whenever possible, identify the bill by number and name.
4. Briefly state what position you want your member of congress to take on the issue. Be prepared to give a locally-based rationale for your position.
5. Ask for your legislator's position on the bill.
6. If asked, give your address and contact information so you can receive a written response.

» **TIP:** Most legislators have Pierre-based phone numbers. If you are calling during the day, call the Senate or House directly by calling 605-773-3251 or fax 605-773-4576.

Meeting Face-to-Face with your Legislators

Meeting in person with your legislators is the

most effective way to make your views known and influence legislation. You can visit your legislators prior to session, or during session at their local crackerbarrels.

In addition to visiting a crackerbarrel, consider inviting your legislators to visit your district to see programs in action. If a face-to-face meeting cannot be arranged, consider setting up a conference call with your legislator and several other education advocates.

Tips for a Successful Meeting

1. Hold a pre-meeting with everyone who will be lobbying to make sure all agree on your position. Try scheduling a half hour meeting prior to crackerbarrels to organize which advocates will ask which questions.
2. Be concise and focus on just a few issues or bills. Remember that your legislator may have little understanding of a particular bill, so be prepared to educate him or her.
3. Whenever possible, speak from personal experience. Provide brief anecdotal evidence of how this issue effects your local school district, and there for the legislators constituents.
4. Ask directly for your legislators support. If your legislator is supportive, ask him or her to lobby other legislators or to state their position during caucus times. If your legislator disagrees with you, her him or her out politely, express respectful disappointment, and rebut his or her argument if you have the facts to do so. Be courteous – you'll have other issues to take up in the future.
5. Always provide a concise, one-page fact sheet or letter describing your position to be left with the member of congress as a reminder of the issues and your visit.
6. After the meeting, follow up with a letter, e-mail or fax to reinforce your position, and thank the legislator for their time, very important.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

Joining an Organized Network

One of the best ways to increase the influence of your local school board and school district is to join a broader network of education advocates – to get organized! In addition to the power of joining forces with other advocates, most networks provide valuable information about which issues need your attention, when to get involved and how to have an impact.

ASBSD has created one such network, called the Legislative Action Network (LAN), made up of school board members and administrators from every legislative district.

ASBSD's Legislative Action Network

ASBSD LAN members work together with ASBSD to advocate for public education. The one-two punch can be a powerful and influential partnership.

Learn more about ASBSD's Legislative Action Network here: <http://asbsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Role-of-ASBSD-LAN-Members.pdf>.

ASBSD calls on a LAN member through the LAN Alert communication. Because LAN Members may need to act quickly, ASBSD asks that LAN members have regular access to e-mail, and that they check it on a regular basis during session.

- » LAN Alert is sent out if a critical vote is scheduled in Pierre, signaling you to act quickly to contact your legislators. Often times, action on the bill will take place in the next couple of days and your voice is critical.

FYI: ASBSD LAN Members

Every school board appoints a board member as its ASBSD Legislative Action Network (LAN) member to attend to legislative issues. LAN members and ASBSD staff work to build and maintain a link between state legislators and their local school district.

LAN members are asked to personally contact their legislator(s) and other school board members in their area when quick contact with a legislator is needed.

In order for school board members to influence legislation with grassroots advocacy, ASBSD needs LAN members to make a commitment to the following responsibilities:

- » Legislative Action Network Members develop, maintain and nurture constructive dialogue with state and federal policy-makers.
- » Legislative Action Network Members facilitate visits by legislators to schools and classrooms in their districts.
- » Legislative Action Network Members keep informed about current education issues.
- » Legislative Action Network Members are willing to call their legislators at home or at the state capitol within a short period of time, generally within an hour or two of receiving the call from ASBSD staff.
- » Legislative Action Network Members are willing and able to provide specific information to legislators from their local district perspective.
- » Legislative Action Network Members are willing to advocate issues from a state-wide perspective when necessary.
- » Legislative Action Network Members provide ASBSD with their contact information (e-mail address[es] and telephone numbers) and be accessible for ASBSD staff to contact them at work or at home when the need arises.
- » Legislative Action Network Members inform other board members and community members of the relationship between state and federal policy and public schools.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: USING THE MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE

How to Use the Media to Communicate with Legislators

Never underestimate the power of the press – legislators certainly don't. Many legislators author a weekly column for the local newspapers while the Legislature is in session, which shows how important they believe the local media to be. Legislators look to the media to “take a pulse” on what is important to their constituents. If you educate the media effectively, your view and your issues are likely to get positive press that goes straight to your legislator.

Writing Letters-to-the-Editor and Opinion Editorials

Letters-to-the editor and opinion editorials written by readers (called op-eds) are useful ways to speak out on issue, respond to an article or editorial, or express your position in your own words. They are often read by your legislators and double-time as a lobbying tool.

Concentrate on writing letters-to-the-editor or op-eds for your local paper since that will have the greatest impact. Even a letter or op-ed that does not get published is valuable because it may be considered by a newspaper's editorial board reviewing an issue. Or, it may cause the paper to write a story on the topic.

Hints for effective letters-to-the-editor and op-eds

1. Be brief and focus on one issue. If the article is too long, the newspaper may edit out some important facts. Typically, a letter-to-the-editor is limited to 200 words, and op-eds should be kept under 500 words. To make sure, review your paper's letter policy, which is usually published on the newspapers' opinion page.
2. For a letter-to-the-editor, refer to a recent event or an article which has appeared in the newspaper and include the article's date and title.
3. When applicable, close your letter or op-ed by asking readers to contact their legislators about the issue.

4. Give your address, school district and phone number so that newspapers can verify authorship.

5. Clip your letter-to-the-editor or op-ed and mail or fax it to your legislator.

Meeting with Editorial Boards

There is nothing more powerful than a newspaper carrying a positive lead editorial that supports your cause. It is unlikely, however, that this will happen without some footwork. Meeting with editorial boards in advance to explain your views can be the catalyst for a favorable editorial that will address the issue at home as well as in Pierre.

To facilitate a successful meeting:

1. Request a formal meeting by writing a letter to the editorial page editor or by calling the editorial office. Briefly explain the issue you would like to discuss and who will be with you at the meeting.
2. Go the meeting prepared to lay the facts on the table as well as your background materials. If possible, bring the president of your school board and other leaders from a coalition, if one exists, to lend weight to the meeting.
3. Although a face-to-face meeting is more effective, you can also simply write to the editorial page editor, send your background material and follow-up by phone.
4. When preparing the background material, try to include both the local and broader implications of the issue so the editor can see that it hits home and is of wider concern.
5. Once you have made contact with members of the editorial board, keep that relationship going. Send a thank-you note for the meeting and another note if they run a favorable editorial.

FYI: Tips for effective media

- 1. Stay local:** One strong article in your hometown newspaper may be worth 10 in the Argus Leader.
- 2. Keep focused:** You may have many issues to bring to the media, but stick to one at a time or they will all get buried.
- 3. Clip and send your good press:** A good article can have a long life. Make sure to send press clipping to your legislators, coalition partners and other decision makers. If your paper has an online edition, you can send a link to the article in an e-mail.
- 4. Don't forget your own media outlets:** Take advantage of district newsletters, publications, radio and cable programs to educate and get others involved in your advocacy efforts.
- 5. Just the facts:** Stick to what you know and never exaggerate. Remember, you can always get back to reporters after finding the right answer.
- 6. Don't just say it – show it:** A demonstration or real-life testimonial goes a long way to illustrate your point and make it more colorful.
- 7. Build media relationships:** Get to know the education reporters or the editors of the local newspaper, and schedule a meeting with the editorial board.
- 8. Put media relations in your advocacy policy:** Media relations should be a year-round function – part of your districts "official" advocacy efforts.
- 9. Appoint a press spokesperson for your school board:** This contact person must be fully informed about your school districts positions and about how state-level policy may impact local decisions.
- 10. Take full advantage of the all the media outlets:** Perhaps there are two newspapers that serve your local area. Keep radio stations and TV stations in mind, too.

FYI: Sample Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I am writing in response to the article "Legislators Say Education is Top Priority" that appeared in the Nov. 8 SD Town News.

Every year going into legislative session, our local legislators tout the importance of education, yet the Legislature has been unable to find a long-term solution for education funding.

Our school district has been improving despite having to cut \$1.6 million in operating expenses, but, we have come to the point where we can no longer cut programs and staff – doing so would hamper the district's ability to continually improve.

I urge our legislators to back Senate Bill 120, which would phase in an additional \$820 per student over the next five years. By passing SB 120, and increasing state aid to education, the school district can: return opt-out money to local taxpayers; fund after school tutoring programs; allow the district to rehire a guidance counselor to help students transition to college; implement a talented and gifted program; and better compensate our highly-qualified staff.

We have a responsibility to prepare our children for a global economy, and the state has an equal responsibility to ensure SD Town school district has sufficient resources to be able to do so.

Sincerely,

*Pat Smith
President
SD Town School Board*

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A July to June Advocacy Strategy

In order to have a real impact on state-level policy decisions, remember the golden rule – make a habit out of advocacy.

Effective education advocacy is a year-round job. It's not enough to wait until there is a crisis. To win the advocacy game, you need to work through the year to develop and nurture relationships with your legislators. Generally, that requires passing and advocacy policy for your local school district that state explicitly your district's commitment to advocacy for education, then following up with your regular advocacy actions.

July

It's the start of a new school year, and a good time to decide how your board is going to handle advocacy for the upcoming year. Set up a point person for ASBSD's Legislative Action Network, and collect a current list of legislator contact information for the entire school board to reference. Revisit your advocacy policy to ensure oncoming board members realize your board's commitment to advocacy. Agree on who has the authority to sign lobbying letters and use district letterhead. In general, it's a good time to discuss with the district leadership team how the board and administration will approach advocacy efforts.

August

Start forming a network of local education advocates that will work together in the upcoming session. Seek out other education groups, like members of the PTA and teachers, and also approach other civic groups, religious leaders and community foundations. Talk with them about the successes in your district, and share the challenges. Make sure to tell them how much their support will mean to the students in your community.

September

Invite your legislators to a school social event, like an athletic event or music concert, and recognize them for being there. These events are a goodwill, non-partisan chance for you to cement a tie with your legislator.

October

Use information from the ASBSD region meetings to discuss ASBSD proposed resolutions, and establish legislative priorities for your school district. Make a list of the kind of information you need to support your priorities, and begin gathering it. Once you've come to an agreement, send a letter to your legislators to inform them of your official positions, and ask for their support.

November

With Legislative Session just around the corner, invite your legislators to breakfast to discuss the upcoming session and your district's priorities. Have any supporting information ready. It's a good idea to any members of your local coalition, too. Make sure to ask them to drop you a note when they decide where they are going to hold their crackerbarrels, and ask them how they would prefer to be contacted during the session.

December

Legislative session is a month away, and the press coverage is heating up. Keep informed by reading your local paper, and be prepared to respond with a letter-to-the-editor. Or, shape the debate by authoring an op-ed that clearly defines a key legislative priority and how it will impact your district.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

January

Legislative session kicks off, and you'll have to process a lot of information quickly. If you are a LAN member keep a close watch for the LAN Alert, which will provide information on legislation as it moves through the process. The ASBSD Blog and Bill Tracker are the best place to keep up on what is happening, and what is about to happen. Be prepared to call, fax, write or e-mail your legislators. Remember to attend local crackerbarrels to get your advocacy message out.

February

The session is winding down, and most of the major education legislation will be acted on. Be ready to contact your legislators, and encourage the members of your local coalition to be particularly active during crunch time.

March

The session ends, and it's time to evaluate how your legislators supported public education. Prepare a summary of how each legislator voted on key bills, and present that information at your board meeting. Make sure to illustrate the impact their votes had on your district.

April

With the summary prepared, it's reward time. Invite your legislators to be honored guests at a school function, and make light of their contribution to your district. Present them with a plaque or framed certificate to make it official and say "thanks for a job well done."

May

Districts are building budgets, and it's a good time to invite legislators in to see how their decisions impact education programming at the local level.

June

If your graduation is in June, send a personal letter inviting your legislators to attend. Graduation is the reason K-12 education exists, and a legislator seeing that first hand is a positive reinforcement that their actions impact the lives of so many children.