

# Supporting Early Childhood Initiatives

(a chapter from) LEGISLATIVE STRATEGIES FOR EVERYDAY PEOPLE  
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## The Art of Advocacy (for Everyday People)

There are basic guidelines for educating and working with policy makers at all levels of government. The following advice, drawn from the experience of long-time legislative staff, as well as state and local advocates for children, is as applicable to parents, teachers, or early childhood service providers who are making phone calls to their school board member or city council member, as it is to paid professional lobbyists.

### *CLEARLY IDENTIFY YOUR PROBLEM OR ISSUE AND DO YOUR HOMEWORK*

Take the time to clearly define what actions or decisions you would like from a policy maker.

Ask yourself several questions:

- *What early childhood issues are most pressing to my children (or city or state)?*
- *Which ones will policy makers and the public care about?*

The range of possible issues is extensive—from access, cost, and quality of child care to prenatal care, childhood autism, and school readiness. Be aware of which issues this year are sparking deep concern among the public and policy makers. Make sure that you have evidence that the problem is urgent and troubling to other parents or to the public.

- *What is the best solution to this problem?*

Be willing to put time into researching your proposal. Be able to respond to questions describing who, and how many children, will be affected by this policy or program change.

Provide evidence that your approach is both effective and cost-efficient.

- *Does your solution require legislation or public funding? Are there other ways to address this issue?*

If the issue can be addressed without legislation or public funding, find alternative, creative solutions.

- *Is the proposal realistic and feasible? What will it cost? Who will implement it?*

Legislative proposals for early childhood programs require extensive planning, often lasting many months.

At a minimum, a proposal for a new program must describe:

- why the program is needed;
- whom—and how many children and families it will serve;
- what the program will accomplish, and how performance will be measured;
- who at the state, local government, or school level will administer the program; and
- the costs of the program and how it will be funded.

- *What kind of support do you have?*

Determine who else is speaking out for this proposal and identify which groups and legislators will likely support this idea. It is equally important to distinguish who is likely to be opposed, especially if your opposition consists of key legislators.

If you have more than one idea or proposal, put them in priority order, using the criteria of need, cost, feasibility, and expenditure of time necessary to educate and persuade policy makers.

Recognize that you may not have the time or resources to accomplish all your priorities.

### *BUILD COALITIONS*

One of the first questions a policy maker is likely to ask is, “Who else supports this idea?” Ideas rarely become policy, budget allocations, or law unless they draw from a broad base of support.

By taking the time to build alliances, whether among other parents at a school or among statewide organizations serving children, you can show that the idea is important enough to garner support from others. These coalitions can also provide the people, time, and energy necessary for sustaining your efforts through the political process.

Make sure, however, that you have your act together—that your allies are truly in agreement with both your “good idea” and its importance. Policy makers have little patience for advocates who appear to disagree.

And once credibility is lost, it is rarely regained.

#### Going Beyond the “Usual Suspects”

The public-private Educare Colorado initiative is spearheaded by a coalition of leaders from business, foundations, early education, health, and religious communities working to create a statewide early education system. In partnership with the state, the nonprofit organization is working

#### *GET TO KNOW KEY POLICY MAKERS AND UNDERSTAND WHAT MAKES THEM TICK*

Several generalizations apply to elected policy makers, whether they are city council members, county commissioners, school board members, legislators, or members of Congress:

- *They care about serving the public, particularly their constituency, and sought election to make a difference.*
- *They care about children and families, although their approaches may vary based on individual experiences and political philosophy.*
- *They want to receive credit (and be reelected) for their*

*accomplishments.*

- *They need good, reliable information to do their job well.*

Effective advocates take the time to get to know the policy makers who represent them. At the grassroots level, this usually means the city council members, county commissioners, school board members, and legislators from your specific area. Learn a bit about their philosophy of public service and what motivates them. Research their legislative priorities and determine if your ideas can be aligned with their interests. Learn their committee assignments and their role, if any, in budget deliberations.

Do not make assumptions about policy makers’ support for children and families based on their political affiliation or whether they categorize themselves as “liberal” or “conservative.” Child and family issues encompass a broad spectrum from education to child abuse, and from immunizations to juvenile crime. Politicians are likely to support some issues and oppose others based on the specifics of the issue, how it relates to their constituency, cost, and many other factors.

### *BECOME A “SOURCE”*

Policy makers need solid information on a broad range of subjects to do their job well. They usually seek information through a network of friends, colleagues, and others. Most important, they want solid, reliable, and pertinent information, and they want to know the pros and cons of every issue. There are many ways to become a source:

- *Become a local informant on your specific area of child and family services.*

Be proactive. When an issue related to your expertise emerges, send your representative a one-page information sheet outlining the issue, local effects, pros and cons, and your well-reasoned recommendation

for action. Emails are fine. After a while, if your information proves useful and reliable, the policy maker is likely to start seeking your advice about related issues.

- *Visit your representative.*

All policy makers, even those who spend a lot of time in the state capital or Washington, D.C. keep in touch with constituents and their electoral district. When they are in town and focused on local issues, schedule either a “meet and greet” appointment to introduce yourself or a more substantive meeting to present specific information to them. In either case, respect their time by being brief and to the point.

- *Better yet, invite policy makers to visit your program.*

If you are involved with a school, preschool program, family resource center, teen parent program, or any other type of service program funded by public money, invite your representatives to visit. In many cases, they will jump at the opportunity to get out of the office, see what is really going on, and make their own judgments about the program. Make sure you schedule a time when children or their parents are available, and when there is an interesting activity. Provide the policy maker with specific information on your activities and successes, as well as your needs. And it doesn't hurt to have a camera handy to capture pictures with cute children for the policy maker's office wall, or even (with permission) to invite the local newspaper to report on the visit.

- *Get to know the representative's staff, and never underestimate their value.*

Staff are policy makers' eyes and ears in the local community, and also organize and protect their time. A rule of thumb is to treat staff well: They are much more likely to convey your message to their boss and to portray you and your issues in a favorable light. Staff—from the receptionist who answers the phone to key legislative aides—are responsible for three key tasks: to research issues, solve constituent problems, and be a conduit of information to their boss. Get to know them, treat them with respect, and ask them to convey your messages.

### *TIMING IS EVERYTHING*

Issues come and go in cycles. One year, politicians seem to dedicate most of their time and focus on education, another year on energy problems, and in yet another year they may emphasize crime and punishment legislation. The sad truth is that in a year when the politicians are focused on building a new jail, raising test scores, or solving an energy crisis, they are less likely to focus extensively on other issues. Although it is not impossible to get your issues addressed in an “off” year, your chance of capturing their attention is diminished. On the other hand, if it happens to be a “kids and education year,” go for it. Bad budget years tend to eclipse other priorities. When policy makers are faced with making large budget cuts, even to successful, long-established programs, they do not want to hear about your new, wonderful, costly idea that will save kids' lives or improve reading scores, unless you can identify savings or new, outside sources of funding. However, policy makers also do not want to look like the bad guys. In lean budget years, look for creative low- or no-cost solutions.

### *UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS*

At every level of government, from school site council to the federal government, there is a prescribed process with established deadlines for ideas to become law or for funding proposals to become part of the budget. While professional lobbyists are hired to understand the intricacies of these processes at the higher levels of government, even grassroots advocates should learn the basics, including:

- deadlines, if any, to introduce or pass bills;
- the committees assigned to hear the bill and their members;
- deadlines in the budget process;
- how to convey support or opposition to a proposal, bill, or budget idea; and
- how to make changes to (amend) legislation as it makes its way through the process.

There are many ways to learn the process, from books and information pamphlets to meeting with lobbyists and policy makers' staff. If possible, enlist the support of powerful, well known, well-respected individuals in your advocacy efforts. Even if their knowledge of your issue is limited, leaders such as those from the business, labor, health care, and religious communities can be very helpful in gaining access to policy

makers or in becoming spokespersons for your cause. Frequently, policy makers care about who supports an idea as much as its content.

Moreover, they want to hear these ideas from trusted, influential voices.

#### *MAKE YOUR IDEAS HEARD*

If you feel strongly about an issue, bill, or budget item, make sure your voice is heard. Numbers count. Organize your allies and, at every stage of the process, make calls and send letters, emails, and faxes both to your local representatives and to members of the committees assigned the bill or budget item. Most policy makers keep a tally of constituent calls and record how many constituents support and oppose each issue. Finally, if you testify before policy makers, be quick, precise, to the point, and very respectful of the time and stature of the policy makers. You usually will be given no more than one to five minutes to state and explain your support or opposition. Make the most of the opportunity.

#### *BE WILLING TO DEDICATE MANY HOURS TO THE CAUSE*

The policy-making process is slow and onerous.

Political leaders have to be educated on the issues and persuaded to your point of view, one by one. Constituents and allies have to be brought on board. Strategies must be devised. Opposing views must be negotiated and reconciled again and again, at each stage of the process. Votes must be found. Depending on your issue, whom you are trying to influence, the number and strength of your allies, and the size of your community, you may need to spend only a small amount of time writing letters or calling policy makers. Or you may need to devote hundreds of hours over weeks and months.

#### *SUPPORT POLICY MAKERS WHO SUPPORT YOU*

Politics is based on give and take. You are much more likely to persuade politicians to actively support your issues if you also support them. If a policy maker has been responsive to your children's needs, carried a bill for your organization, or worked hard to save your program from budget cuts, consider helping him or her during the next election campaign. Walk a precinct, host a coffee, make phone calls, or write a check. You should *never, ever, ever* link a campaign donation to a specific vote, however. That is illegal, unethical, and likely to spoil any ongoing relationship with a policy maker.

#### *BE PATIENT AND NEVER GIVE UP*

Some of the most important legislation on the books has taken years to achieve. It sometimes takes years for policy makers or the public to recognize the importance of your issue and become willing to support it. Other times, you may have inadvertently selected a legislator to carry your bill who is out of favor with the legislative leadership; your political strategies backfire; or it is a bad budget year. If you have a good idea and can support it, try again. And again. And again. Although legislation, policy making, and advocacy are not for the fainthearted, they are critical to creating new ways to serve children and to sustaining effective programs. Improving the lives of children and families will take everybody working together, both in our day-to-day jobs and in the city council; county commissioner; and school board chambers; the state legislature; and Congress.

\*This is an excerpt from the book, "Supporting Early Childhood Initiatives: LEGISLATIVE STRATEGIES FOR EVERYDAY PEOPLE". You can find the rest of the book and order form at their website: [www.financeproject.org](http://www.financeproject.org). Look under publications, then Early Learning and School readiness, then Supporting Early Childhood Strategies. The table of contents for the book include: supporting The ABC's of legislation; legislative strategies to support early childhood initiatives; legislative strategies in times of budget crisis; case studies of caring communities and healthy start ;the art of advocacy (for everyday people);additional resources on financing early care and education initiatives; and other resources.