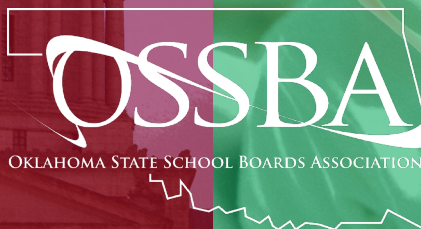




ADVOCACY TOOLKIT





888.528.3571 • www.ossba.org

In order to be an effective legislator, elected officials rely on constituent input. Ongoing communication is key for public representatives to know and understand how voters feel about particular issues.

As a school board member, your responsibility in communicating with members of the legislature is important, but so is communicating with your community.

This toolkit seeks not only to provide tips on effective advocacy at the state capitol building but also in your hometowns with community members, business owners, city council, faith leaders and community volunteers.

ADVOCACY IS:
shaping public policy through
outreach, relationships, research
and grassroots support.

“Advocacy” and “lobby,” while often used interchangeably, are two very different concepts. Lobbying is targeted communication that seeks to directly influence a lawmaker to support or oppose a particular piece of legislation. Often here at OSSBA, we find ourselves in “crisis lobbying mode” -- sending out email and text alerts to membership asking that they call their legislator asking for support or opposition to a bill that is hours or minutes from a vote.

Advocacy, on the other hand, is shaping public policy in a particular direction. It is engaging in public outreach to promote education; it is good relationships with media; it is research and fact finding to support a position; it’s mobilizing grassroots support for an issue. And it should be happening 24/7, 365 days a year for every school board member and superintendent.

A great example of how advocating for public education in Oklahoma has worked is illustrated by the largest certified employee pay raise for school employees in Oklahoma history that was passed in 2018. For several years preceding the passage of the pay increase, we have been talking about education funding and the teacher shortage epidemic. We have provided research to members, and through continued advocacy efforts by schools, the goal of achieving teacher compensation comparable to the regional average came to fruition. Everyone in Oklahoma knew there was a shortage and agreed something had to be done. It was just a matter of time.

HOW CAN YOU ADVOCATE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION?

Be a cohesive and respectful team as a board. School board members don't always agree on what is best for the school. They may vote differently at meetings. But outside the meeting, school board members should present a unified front focusing on what is best for the students in their school district. They should use every opportunity to talk about what is happening in their district and advocate for any resource the school needs to improve educational outcomes. This can be as simple as striking up a conversation at the football game, at church or a cookout. It never includes speaking poorly about another board member or an employee. Always keep the conversation positive.

Build community support for your school and education in general. For example, a long-term, sustainable funding source to bring per-pupil expenditures in Oklahoma to the regional average is of such vital importance that board members and superintendents need to expand their personal advocacy efforts in order to mobilize entire communities. By engaging and building relationships with local businesses, parents, seniors, service clubs, neighborhood groups, taxpayer groups, churches, law enforcement, local government, local associations and others in your advocacy efforts, school boards can more forcefully impact education policies. Board members can share important news about education in many ways, such as speaking to local groups, writing guest editorials and providing news and updates for newsletters. The more you are able to keep people informed about education issues, the more they will come to understand the issues and feel comfortable contacting legislators when needed.

Mobilize support. Various groups and individuals will be more willing to get involved if you prioritize your issues and only ask them to help on two or three of the most significant ones each legislative session – this also helps to sharpen the focus of your message.

Encourage individuals to write or call legislators in support of your board's position. Encourage people in your community to mention whether they are parents, local business owners, members of neighborhood task forces, seniors, etc., when they contact legislators. This reinforces the notion that education is a community interest of concern to all citizens.

Engage the media. Legislators read their local newspapers. They care about what is being said on local radio and television shows. By developing positive relationships with reporters and sharing information about education, board members can heighten the community's awareness of critical issues and, in turn, have an influence on the development of education policies.

Become a resource for legislators. Get to know your legislator BEFORE session even starts. More on that in the next section.

TELLING YOUR STORY IN THE MEDIA

Public education advocates have many ways to share the story of their school district, educators and students. Traditional news media and social media offer virtually unlimited opportunities to educate your community – especially those who might not be familiar with your local schools -- and grow the number of public education advocates!

Traditional news media: News articles, letters to the editor and op-eds

A great way to shape public policy throughout the year is to establish a positive working relationship with your local media outlets — radio, television, publications. Most lawmakers read their local newspapers – even when they are at the state capitol. It allows them to keep in touch with what is happening in their home districts while working away from home.

You are an expert on what’s happening in the schools you represent. Use that knowledge. Build relationships with reporters so they will reach out to you when education issues arise. While it’s sometimes best to refer reporters to the administration, there are also occasions where the board member voice is important and even more influential. When you’ve addressed the topic at hand, don’t forget to leave the reporter with some positive information about your schools that they can use for a future story.

Anyone can submit a letter to their local newspaper editor in hopes of having it published or submit an opinion editorial (op-ed), which is typically longer than a letter and is useful for introducing a new topic or providing more background and context on a topic that may have already appeared in the publication. You can use a letter to the editor to talk about extracurricular or academic accomplishments of individual or groups of students, about needs within your district or classrooms or to perhaps share about a new or expanded program. Your local newspaper may have guidelines on word limits for letters and op-eds or how often the newspaper will publish a letter or op-ed from a single author. Please check with your local media outlets for submission guidelines and be sure to ask about their deadlines so you can submit your piece in a timely manner. You can also submit a photo of yourself or related to the topic with the letter/op-ed for consideration. This can help create visual interest in the piece when published.

Letters and op-eds are also a great way to localize a broader topic, including how a particular piece of legislation would affect your school district.

OSSBA is here to help you in this endeavor! We are happy to review your articles or assist with writing one. Occasionally, OSSBA will provide “template” letters and op-eds on specific issues that can be localized and submitted to your local newspaper. Please contact OSSBA’s Communications Director Christy Watson at christyw@ossba.org.

Social media

Social media is a growing and powerful advocacy tool! Use your social media accounts to share the great things happening in your district. You can share posts and pictures from the accounts operated by the school district and local news media stories to your personal timelines and post about your own great experiences in schools! Keep it positive, upbeat and informational.

The reach of both traditional and social media allows board members to build trust in the community as a source of important information about education and to influence those who may not be familiar with the issues.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR LEGISLATORS AND COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

No one can better explain decisions that have an impact at the local level more than those involved on the front lines.

Sending letters and emails, making phone calls and paying personal visits are typical ways in which you as a constituent can get your message to legislators.

You can be most effective in conveying a message by relating issues to your own personal experience as a school board member.

A personal visit can be the single most effective lobbying technique. Your representative or senator will be impressed with the effort you're putting forth and will usually make time to meet with you. If you can't make a trip to the Capitol, try setting up a meeting in your community.

Get involved before the legislative session begins.

Get to know your audience. Who is your elected representative and senator? Does he/she serve on a key committee?

Build a relationship. Making contact repeatedly and being credible and reasonable every time will help build a relationship between you and your legislator. Establishing an ongoing relationship with your representative or senator will give you more influence as a constituent.

Act locally. Involve your representative and senator in your local activities. Invite them to your school board meetings. Invite them to your school and school activities. Introduce them to community members.

One issue at a time. Restrict yourself to one, or at most two, topics. Pick the most vital and explore it in depth.

Share your own experience. State why you are concerned about an issue. As a member of the education community, you provide excellent supporting evidence.

Put thoughts into your own words.

Offer solutions. Don't just talk about how bad a problem is; tell your legislator what you'd like to see done to fix it.

Offer to be a resource. Exchange contact information and promise to be a resource for them on education issues anytime they need it. And follow through. If you don't know an answer to a question, you can always ask someone at your school and OSSBA.

Follow-up. Be polite and persistent by following up with a thank you letter. Legislators clearly remember the constituents that follow up.

TIPS ON WRITING A LEGISLATOR

Most representatives and senators read a significant portion of their mail personally. Your emails and letters do count! Remember just be yourself. (Letter and email used interchangeably)

Your purpose for writing should be stated in the first paragraph of the letter. If the letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly, such as H.B. ____ or S.B. ____.

Explain which school board you represent and your vested interest in the topic. Be courteous, to the point, and include key information, using examples to support your position.

Address only one issue in each letter/email; and, if possible, keep the letter to one page.

Use the correct address and salutation.

To a Senator:
The Honorable (full name)
Oklahoma State Senate
2300 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Room ____
Oklahoma City, OK 73105

To a Representative
The Honorable (full name)
Oklahoma House of Representatives
2300 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Room ____
Oklahoma City, OK 73105

Dear Senator (last name):

Dear Representative (last name):

Type or write clearly. Be sure to include your address so they know you are a constituent and can respond to you.

Use your own words. Don't forward a mass email and don't copy and paste from an alert. Put it in your own words and thoughts.

Keep your message focused. Limit your message to 1-3 issues at most. Lead with the most important.

Be brief. Legislators receive hundreds of pieces of correspondence each day. Especially email. Make sure they can read it quickly. Also include in the subject line that you are a constituent.

Be specific. Let the legislator know how these issues affect your district.

Know your facts. Be accurate and honest. OSSBA has information available for you.

Find out how your legislator has voted on similar issues. OSSBA can help you find voting records.

Be timely.

Be persistent. Try to get an answer beyond "I'll keep that in mind" or "here's what's happening on the bill," without being impolite.

Say "thank you." Legislators appreciate thank you after a visit and after a vote. If however they did not support your particular position still follow up with them and explain why you think they should have voted differently and thank them for listening to you.

Don't be negative, condescending or threatening. Always be courteous. The legislator will almost always show you the same courtesy as well.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PHONE CALLS

Phone calls can be an effective way to make your views known to a legislator, although often times you will speak with the assistant. Phone calls are very effective when time is of the essence, such as in the days or hours leading up to important votes.

Remember that if you have given OSSBA your email address you will receive a "Legislative Alert-Take Action" email or text message on your computer and mobile device.

If you don't know a legislator's phone number, please visit the OSSBA website at www.ossba.org/contactyourlegislator.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A PERSONAL VISIT

Meeting with your representative or senator is a very effective way to convey a message about a specific issue or legislative matter. Below are some suggestions to consider when planning a visit.

Plan Your Visit Carefully. Be clear about what it is you want to achieve.

Make an Appointment. When attempting to meet with your legislators, try to schedule a visit. Explain who you are, the school board you represent and your relationship to the area or interests you wish to discuss. You can also drop in if you are at the capitol, but do not expect a great deal of time if you don't have an appointment.

Be Prompt and Patient. If you have an appointment, be punctual and be patient. It is not uncommon for a senator or representative to be running late due to a busy schedule. Be flexible.

Be prepared. Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position. Often, OSSBA will offer "talking points." Legislators are required to take positions on many different issues. In some instances, a member may lack important details about the pros and cons of a particular matter. It is helpful to share with the member information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact of benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation.

Invite to Your District (if you haven't already!). When your legislator is not in session, invite them to your school district. Let them see firsthand how an issue could directly impact your school. Invite them to a school event.

Be Responsive. Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information in the event the legislator expresses an interest or asks questions. If you don't know the answer, promise to look into it and get back promptly. Follow up the meeting with a thank you letter that outlines the different points covered during the meeting.

INVITE YOUR LEGISLATOR TO AN EVENT IN YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT

Invite your legislators anytime during the year to come to your school. During the fall when they are not in session is normally the best time to invite legislators to your district.

During the legislative session, legislators are not in session on Fridays, allowing them time to visit with constituents in their districts. Take advantage of this opportunity and invite your legislators to an event or meeting in your school district.

Plan ahead. Legislators have busy schedules and their calendars can fill up quickly. Send your invitation several months in advance of the date for the event. Send your invitation to their Capitol Office address.

Be flexible. If at all possible, note in the invitation that you are willing to accommodate the legislator's schedule.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM THE OSSBA

After contacting your legislator, please complete the Advocacy Feedback form, which can be found at: <https://ossba.enviseams.com/advocacy>. This will help provide the Government Affairs team in their advocacy efforts at the Capitol.

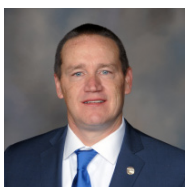
The OSSBA will keep you informed on the latest issues that could directly impact your school district. During session, OSSBA will send weekly legislative updates, and has a joint weekly briefing with CCOSA that is open to all membership at 9 a.m. Tuesdays at OSSBA and/or CCOSA offices. All current-session legislative updates and alerts are saved and available on the OSSBA website under "advocacy."

OSSBA will send via text and email legislative alerts when there is immediate action that we need you to take. The OSSBA will give you talking points, position statements and contact information for you to immediately contact your senator and representative.

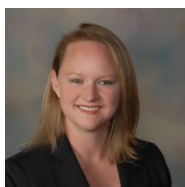
The OSSBA will work hard to provide the most up-to-date information regarding legislation that could have an impact on your district. We will supply you with the tools you need, but we are asking for your help in building a relationship at the grassroots level with your senator and representative. A complete list of education bills is available for you to view on our website during session. After Sine Die, a legislative review will be available online as well. OSSBA also updates our education facts website routinely.

OSSBA loves to hear from you -- and we are happy to help anytime!

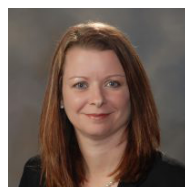
For more information on advocacy efforts, please contact:



Dr. Shawn Hime,
Executive Director
405-528-3571
shawnh@ossba.org



Rooney Virgin, Director
of Government Affairs,
405-528-3571
rooneyv@ossba.org



Christy Watson,
Director of
Communications
405-528-3571
christyw@ossba.org



888.528.3571 • www.ossba.org