

ADVOCATE!

It's your job!



scsba.org

An advocacy toolkit for school board members from the South Carolina School Boards Association

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This Advocacy Toolkit is intended to complement board and board member efforts by providing a guide to assist in lobbying local, state and federal officials on behalf of South Carolina's outstanding public schools and students.

What is grassroots advocacy?

In the broadest sense, grassroots advocacy means any effort to advance or defend the interest of an individual or group by society at a local level. Put more simply, it means trying to get what you want for yourself or someone else through the involvement of common citizens.

Advocacy takes place within the political or governmental sector: the legislative process, executive agencies or the courts. This is because the government has the ultimate responsibility for passing and enforcing laws; committing public resources; defining rights and obligations; and deciding guilt or innocence, punishment or remedy.

Why advocate?

Because local boards of education are part of the political system in South Carolina, and because school board members are elected officials themselves, board members may see themselves as the people making the decisions, instead of trying to influence the decisions.

But, there are a number of reasons why school board members cannot function effectively if they ignore the larger political environment.

Under South Carolina law, school boards "manage and control" local schools. School boards do not have "self-executing"



Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead
American anthropologist (1901-1978)



powers; any authority is granted by the General Assembly.

Likewise, school boards do not have independent authority to raise revenue unless granted by local legislation. The General Assembly decides what kinds of taxes or fees school boards can impose and defines the tax base on which school taxes are levied. The legislators may also impose controls on school district budgets and spending through local or statewide legislation.

State and federal laws and regulations have a great impact on the management and operation of school districts. Just a few of

the areas affected include: employee rights, benefits and working conditions; building and transportation safety codes; environmental regulations; student and staff civil rights; and investment and accounting practices.

The primary responsibility of schools is to educate students. But neither schools nor children exist in a vacuum.

Other institutions also touch the lives of children. Local governments deal with the safety of a child's walk to school or provide health services. Other agencies deal with children whose families cannot or will not support them. Disadvantaged or disabled children may need help that the school alone cannot provide.

In each of these cases, the ability of school boards to carry out their mission is affected by decisions made at other levels of government. School board advocacy means working to influence those decisions in the interests of local and state education.

Does advocacy by board members really make a difference?

Yes, it does! Board members are in a unique position to educate and influence the legislative process.

- Board members are able to provide information about education policy from a local perspective.
- As the policy makers for school districts, board members play an integral role in conjunction with state and federal legislators and the state board to carry out the mission of educating all students.
- Through SCSBA, the unity of local school boards lends strength to our voice in the

legislative process, ensuring that the governor, S.C. General Assembly, S.C. State Board of Education and congressional delegation turn to SCSBA to help determine what is best for South Carolina's public school children.

Tips for effective advocacy

- **Keep it simple** – most issues can be explained, and a position stated, in only a few sentences.
- **Keep it local** – highlight the pros or cons of legislation on your local school system.
- **Use the tool that works for you** – call, write a letter, email or schedule a meeting.
- **Speak up to be heard on key public education issues** – actions and inactions count.
- **Set priorities** – when everything is important, nothing is important.
- **Be direct** – make specific requests for specific positions and actions.
- **Be a team player** – be sure that your advocacy efforts conform to your local board's policies and protocols.
- **Join forces** – remind legislators of any association, coalition or other stakeholder support for your position.
- **Be an educator** – invite elected officials to visit local schools to showcase successful programs.
- **State the positive** – be enthusiastic and courteous. In politics, there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies.

- **Say thank you** – remember to thank each of the elected officials for their time and their position or action on issues where there is agreement.
- **Follow up** – be sure to provide any information offered or requested.
- **Share your experience** – your fellow board members, boards, SCSBA and our allies can benefit from what you've learned.
- **Relax!** Effective advocates do not need to be polished, professional lobbyists.

Advocacy tools

All professions have “tools of the trade” that assist in doing the work required. Board members as advocates should become well acquainted with the tools available to prepare and assist them in speaking and writing effectively on behalf of public education.

Advocacy tools include items such as:

- talking points;
- written and oral testimony;
- correspondence (snail mail or email);
- meetings (formal or impromptu);
- conversations (in person or on the telephone – one hour or one minute); and
- social media interactions.

Contacting elected officials

Regularly contacting legislators and developing a relationship with them assists them in making well-informed decisions regarding education. Ideally, legislators will reciprocate by seeking your input as issues are being considered. Letters,

emails, telephone calls and social media interaction are all effective tools when used correctly. Given the volume of letters and calls a legislator receives, it is important to focus your advocacy efforts. One approach is to meet annually prior to the legislative session to review all major issue areas and priority positions, with targeted meetings and requests for actions during the session. This makes the consideration of local board positions part of the annual legislative process and makes targeted lobbying actions stand out.

Make a phone call: Phone calls are an effective and fast way to communicate with a legislator, especially when a critical vote is coming up. Sometimes, an in-depth conversation with a legislator is possible; at other times, a call may simply be tallied by staff, and the legislators are given counts of constituents for and against the particular issue. Be sure to let staff know you are a school board member, as the legislator may take your call.

When calling during a legislative session:

- Ask to speak with the senator or representative, but be prepared to discuss the issue with a legislative staff assistant.
- Give your name, title and the name of the school board on which you serve.
- Focus the call on one issue or bill and, if possible, identify the bill by number. Briefly state what position you wish the legislator to take, and be prepared to offer a rationale based on local impact.
- Always ask what position the legislator will be taking on the bill or issue.

Write a letter: 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 option. 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.

When writing your letters, keep in mind:

- Focus on one issue or bill per letter, and identify the bill by name and number.
- Express your point of view and explain why your legislator should be supportive.
- Be brief and courteous.
- Briefly explain the local impact of the legislation – just the facts.
- Request that your legislator take a specific position on the bill.
- Ask for a response from your legislator.
- 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.
- 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 email address or phone number as an avenue for return communication.

Send an email : Letters may be ideal when the Legislature isn't in session, but emailing your legislators makes for quicker communication during the session. Email is the quickest form of communication, and it allows you to copy several people at the same time. For instance, you can email your legislator and CC your fellow board members and SCSBA. When emailing your legislator, make sure to include the fact that you are a

school board member from your school district in the subject line.

SCSBA provides an up-to-date database of legislators' contact information on the SCSBA website (scsba.org/issues-and-action/elected-officials/).

Interact on social media: Social media advocacy is one of the quickest and simplest ways to spread your message to your legislators. A majority of legislators communicate through social media. Healthy, congenial interactions on social media sites are a great way to reach out, especially regarding time-sensitive votes and decisions.

Remember to be brief, stating the position you wish the legislator to take and offering simple facts. Social media is also a great place to post pictures and graphics to illustrate your points.

Also, remember to share success stories about your district and public education often so that when the time comes to share your thoughts on key policy issues, legislators have a positive perspective about your district.

Join social media discussions and conversations with your stakeholders and legislators to provide facts and knowledge about hot topics. The more you engage with your community and policymakers, the more likely they are to seek your advice and opinion on decisions.

Use the hashtag #StandUp4SCPublicSchools and be sure to tag @SCSBA in your social media posts.

Leading a successful advocacy meeting with legislators

- **Hold a pre-meeting** with everyone who will be involved in the meeting to make sure there is a consensus on the agenda and positions. Decide in advance who will discuss which points so that the meeting runs smoothly.
- **Be concise and focus** on just a few issues or bills. Remember, the legislator may not be familiar with the bill, so be prepared to educate.
- **Provide brief anecdotal evidence** of how this issue affects the school district and therefore the legislator's constituents.
- **Ask directly for the legislator's support.** If legislators are supportive, ask that they lobby other legislators to support the position. If they disagree, express respectful disappointment, and if possible, rebut their argument. Be courteous – there will always be other issues to agree on in the future.
- **Always provide a concise, one-page fact sheet or letter** describing your position to be left with the legislator as a reminder of the issues and the visit.
- **After the meeting, write a letter** to thank legislators for their time and to reinforce your position. This is also a good opportunity to address any questions asked or to provide additional information.
- **Contact SCSBA** and let us know how the legislator responded to the issues.

Recognizing advocacy efforts

Champions for Public Education

Award: SCSBA offers school boards and districts a way to recognize community residents, organizations or local businesses/industries whose support of and contributions to public education have significantly benefited their school district through the Champions for Public Education Award program.

Award presentations are made locally, either as part of the board's regular meeting or at a special event in the district. In addition to the special local recognition, news releases are provided to the local media and others as requested by the winner.

SCSBA also showcases winning programs in SCSBA publications and on the SCSBA website and social media sites. Nominations are accepted quarterly. For more information, visit

scsba.org/awards-program.

Legislative Advocacy Award: SCSBA knows that school board members are among the most effective advocates for legislation and policy that support public education. Each year in December, SCSBA presents the Legislative Advocacy Award recognizing school boards that have developed and implemented an effective legislative advocacy program. SCSBA staff and the Awards Committee may recommend winners from a small district (up to 2,999 students); a medium-sized district (3,000 to 8,999 students); and a large district (9,000 students and up). For more information and to view sample nominations of past winners, please visit

scsba.org/awards-program.

Advocacy resources

The South Carolina School Boards Association provides many tools to help guide advocacy efforts, including:

- SCSBA's Statements of Belief and Legislative Priorities, which can be found online or on our [website](#)
- Daily and weekly legislative session summaries on priority issues
- **Regional Advocacy Meetings** for advanced training
- **Legislative Preview Webinar**
- Call to action alerts, including talking points and sample letters to legislators and newspapers
- Real-time education bill tracking
- **Direct links to S.C. federal and state** congressional delegation contact information
- **Facebook** and **Twitter** pages keeping members informed of local, state and federal issues
- **National Connection** partnership with NSBA

South Carolina General Assembly:

The South Carolina General Assembly's website (www.scstatehouse.gov) is an excellent resource for session information, legislator contact information, House and Senate agendas and procedures, hearing schedules and information on bill status.

South Carolina State Department

of Education: The South Carolina State Department of Education's (SCDE) website (www.ed.sc.gov) is an excellent resource for information on SCDE divisions and programs; the state board's meeting calendar, agendas and minutes and legal opinions; and SCDE publications and reports on numerous priority issues.

National School Boards Association

(NSBA): NSBA's website (www.nsba.org) has a wealth of public education information from the national perspective, including the Advocacy Action Plan, in-depth background on pending federal budget and policy issues and email alerts to members of Congress.

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

- Attend NSBA Advocacy Institute in Washington, D.C.
- Attend SCSBA Annual Convention.
- Connect with legislators on social media.

JANUARY

- Legislative session begins.
- Schedule advocacy as a board agenda item.
- Share with the board the protocol for legislative alerts.
- Invite district delegation to board meetings on a regular basis.
- Make sure you have legislators' contact information updated and available.
- Hold a grassroots network meeting to review the upcoming session.

APRIL

- Attend 2DAC (Two Days at the Capitol).
- Invite legislators to tour district's schools.
- SCSBA solicits proposed resolutions for the next year from school boards.
- Follow-up with grassroots network meeting participants, and report on key legislation and determine next steps.

MARCH

- Attend 2DAC (Two Days at the Capitol).
- Meet with district delegation at the State House.
- Follow key legislation carefully and review daily and weekly legislative summaries from SCSBA.

CALENDAR

MAY

Invite district delegation to special events.

While preparing the district budget, it's a good time to remind legislators of how their decisions impact education programming at the local level.

Invite legislators to commencement ceremonies.

Highlight student success stories in your district on social media and share with your local delegation.

JUNE

Legislative session ends.

Write district delegation thanking them for their support of public education.

Nominate legislators that would qualify for SCSBA's Champions for Public Education Award. Publicize the nomination and award with local media.

JULY

Identify issues for the next legislative session.

SCSBA legislative committee reviews proposed resolutions for the next session.

AUGUST

Hold a grassroots network meeting to provide a legislative wrap-up, share and evaluate successes and challenges and thank members for support.

SCSBA Board of Directors approves proposed resolutions for the Delegate Assembly.

Invite local delegation to back-to-school events.

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER

Legislators are at home through December. Use this time to get to know your legislators, follow-up on important issues and, most importantly, show them your district.

OCTOBER

Meet with district delegation.

SCSBA sends out proposed resolutions for review before the Delegate Assembly.

Tune in to the SCSBA Legislative Preview webinar.

DECEMBER

Attend Legislative Advocacy Conference.

SCSBA legislative platform adopted at Delegate Assembly.

NOVEMBER

Hold organizational meeting with district grassroots network.

Appoint a board member who will be the legislative liaison for the board and give monthly reports during board meetings.

Board agenda item to decide the board's votes on matters to be voted on during SCSBA Delegate Assembly, including proposed resolutions, board of directors candidates, etc.

