



## **LEGISLATOR VISITS AND ENSUING DISCUSSION**

There is a real need to help our legislators to be knowledgeable about our local school districts so that they can make informed decisions. Schools are changing and the media is often unaware because of a strong public relations campaign and media policy. The following pointers are suggested to help you to be more effective in communicating to your legislators:

- Show legislators how schools have changed. Many things legislators hear that people want are already happening, let them know it. Share your school's innovative problem solving ideas and how your Board has been diligent with the resources available.
- Show legislators how the current accountability process is working. They need to see how parents are involved, how goals are being used, and how progress is being assessed.
- Show the effects of inadequate funding. Usually, board members don't like to admit they are having problems. We take visitors to our newest, best buildings and show off the glitzy programs and equipments. While successes do need to be seen, so do the problems - such as the things we want to change, but can't because of inadequate funding.

In short, the sensitivity level of lawmakers must be increased if we expect them to act on our behalf from an informed point of view. Right now, they may have an unfounded perception of the public schools, teachers, administrators and school boards. If their actions are to be changed, they need more information from you.

### **COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR**

NMSBA may need to call on board members to present testimony to legislators or legislative committees on issues that concern local districts. Legislators appreciate testimony and input from people in the field. They hear from lobbyists all the time. Here are some effective methods for presenting your views to your legislators or legislative committees:

- Be brief and to-the-point. It is better to make just a few key points than to confuse the legislators with too much detail.
- Know what you want to say. It is much more convincing to present your ideas verbally rather than reading directly from a printed page. Make an outline of key points and practice speaking before you testify.

- Use examples to illustrate. Education testimony can often be complicated and hard to follow. Illustrate your points with stories about how bills would actually affect students.
- Keep your goal in mind. Remember the reason you are discussing or testifying and continue to drive your point home. Don't let legislators questions get you off track.
- Put key points in priority order. If you don't get all the time you need, you'll at least have gotten your main points across.
- Prepare a written summary. You will want to pass this on to legislators or committee members, the staff and the press. This way there is a reference for them later. Put your name and contact information on it for follow-up questions if they have any.
- Get your facts straight. .. and attribute them. Giving credit to the source of your information makes you more credible ... and protects your credibility if the information turns out to be incorrect.
- If you don't know, say so. If you are afraid you'll look foolish by not knowing an answer to a question, just think how foolish you'll feel if you give the wrong answer! If asked a question you cannot answer, say so. Offer to promptly get the information to the legislators, committee and/or staff.
- Tell the truth. Misleading legislators or a legislative committee can come back to haunt you
- Be yourself. Try to relax. You may be nervous the first few times you testify, but you will do a lot more to influence the legislative process if you speak from the heart.

### **COMMUNICATING BY TELEPHONE**

Telephoning a legislator is a legitimate form of lobbying, especially when the legislature is in session. If you are new to this form of persuasion, you may want to follow these tips:

- Call the legislator at his/her office. Identify yourself by name and home town. Identify the bill you wish to speak about by its name and number (example: HB 212).
- Briefly state your position on the bill and how you would like the legislator to vote.

- Ask for your legislator's position on the bill, if the legislator requires further information, supply it as quickly as possible.
- Thank the legislator for past votes. It is important not to be abusive or to threaten the legislator, even if he/she has an unfavorable position on the bill.
- If the legislator is not committed to a position, you may wish to intensify your efforts to have the legislator see you side.
- If the legislature is in session, your legislator could be on the floor of the chamber. When talking to a secretary or legislative aide, identify yourself by name and home town; identify the bill by name and number; and state how you would like your legislator to vote. Leave phone numbers where you can be reached if the legislator has any questions.

### **COMMUNICATING BY A VISIT**

Nothing is more effective than communicating your position face-to-face with a legislator. Here are some ideas for how to do it well:

- If legislators know you have traveled to the Capitol, they will usually try to find some way to meet with you. It's a good idea to drop a note to your legislator ahead of time stating your position and your hope for speaking with the legislator.
- The legislator may neither have read the bill nor have an understanding of it. Your main job is to inform him/her about its impact.
- Attempt to relate to the legislator in a personal way so the legislator will have a frame of reference when the bill is called for vote. For example, if you have social, political or business ties, common church affiliations or a shared community activity, they may serve as identification when your point of view is considered.
- Let your legislators know if you are working with others on the issue, if you are active in the community or if you are representing you school board.
- It is best for board members to visit with legislators in a small group - three is optimum - and to keep the visit as brief as possible. One person should be the main spokesperson.
- A concise, one-page fact sheet on an issue or bill is helpful. Leave it with the legislator as a reminder of the issue and of the visit.
- Don't allow a disagreement over a position to end in harsh words or remarks. For one thing, it will be easier for the legislator to discredit you. Second, you may need to communicate with the legislator on future issues.