



NEW MEXICO SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

SCHOOL BOARD LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

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ADOPT-A-LEGISLATOR

The Adopt-a-Legislator program is a proven strategy to help New Mexico school board members become effective advocates for their school districts. The goal of the program is to help each board member develop a meaningful relationship with one of the policymakers who represents your school district. Below are steps for implementing the Adopt-a-Legislator program in your school district:

- (1) **Each board member adopts a legislator.** The board president asks members to volunteer to “adopt” one of the legislators who represent the school district. A board member assumes responsibility for adopting only *one* legislator, so that the advocacy responsibility is not overly burdensome.
- (2) **Board members initiate a relationship with his/her adopted legislators:**
 - Meet with the adopted legislator at the district offices to get to know one another, without discussing too many education issues;
 - Provide the legislator and his/her staff with basic facts about your school district, preferably in written format which the legislator’s staff could retain for future reference; and,
 - Send a short thank you note, offering to serve as a resource to the legislator and his/her staff.
- (3) **Board members continue to build a relationship with the adopted legislators:**
 - Invite the adopted legislator to attend the hearing on the district’s budget;
 - Invite the adopted legislator to back-to-school events; allow the legislator to address the audience;
 - Arrange briefings for the legislator by key district staff (e.g., business manager, personnel director, superintendent and assistant superintendents, principals, and teachers);
 - Meet regularly with the adopted legislator to discuss how various laws are affecting your district and challenges your district faces that could be remedied through legislation; and,
 - Share with the adopted legislator NMSBA’s Legislative Program when it is published in early January and discuss additional legislative issues that your district may have identified.
- (4) **Board members share personal contact information with their adopted legislators.** Each board member should share his/her e-mail address, cell phone number and home phone number with the adopted legislator so that the legislator can contact the member for guidance about the local impact of pending legislation.
- (5) **Board members communicate with their adopted legislators on a timely basis.** Before the legislator votes on pending legislation/ rules, the member responsible for that legislator should make contact via telephone, e- mail, or fax to explain the impact legislation/rules would have on the school district and request that the adopted legislator vote for/against the legislation.
- (6) **Board Members recognize and thank their adopted legislators.** Periodically, members should recognize and thank their adopted legislators with a personal letter, an article in the district’s newsletter, or a small reception for the work he/she has done on behalf of their school district.

Please call Joe Guillen, NMSBA Executive Director, with any questions regarding the Adopt-a-Legislator Program at (505) 983-5041.

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GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION (Suggested Tasks and Timeline for Boards)

The New Mexico Legislature convenes in Santa Fe in January each year. What happens during the legislative session inevitably affects your school district and your decisions as a school board member. Is your board ready to promote the interests of your students during the legislative session?

Below are suggested tasks and timelines to help your board *impact* and *monitor* the legislative process to ensure that the laws that pass will *help* your district educate its students:

A. Late November: Determine the District's legislative priorities

In anticipation of the upcoming legislative session, the board should focus on what needs to be accomplished legislatively on behalf of the district. The district may create its own legislative agenda and help promote the NMSBA Legislative Program which reflects the legislative priorities of New Mexico's school districts. This year's legislative resolutions are already available at www.nmsba.org, along with an explanation of the process through which the legislative program will be developed.

B. Early December: Create Legislative Subcommittee

The board should decide whether all members want to be active advocates during the session or whether to designate a "legislative subcommittee" composed of board members who would be willing to:

- a. *Contact legislators* about the local impact of pending legislation throughout the session
- b. *Testify before the legislature* on behalf of the district (as necessary)
- c. *Ensure that other board members are aware* of pending or passed legislation and regulatory rules. NMSBA provides regular legislative updates to school all school board members and superintendents.

C. Early December: Learn about the "hot" issues

Board members may want to learn about the issues that will likely be addressed in legislation during the session. Issue papers provide background information and explain the pro/con arguments surrounding the "hot issues." Issue papers are available from many sources, including on the NMSBA.

D. Early December: Designate the district's "on-call representatives"

Designate a person or group of persons to be the district's "on call representatives" during the session to answer questions from legislators and legislative staff about the impact of pending legislation on your district. The "on-call representatives" should include both board members (i.e., the board's legislative subcommittee) and key district administrators, as legislators need to hear both perspectives.

E. Mid-December: Host a luncheon for your district's legislators

Schedule a luncheon with the delegation of legislators who represent your school district and/or region. At the luncheon, provide each legislator with contact information for your district's "on-call representatives."

F. Early January: Meet with individual legislators

The board or the board's legislative subcommittee should meet with each of the state legislators who represent your school district and/or region to discuss issues important to your district and/or the local impact of pending legislation.

G. January – February: Frequent legislative briefings

Every week (or more frequently as the session progresses), the board's legislative subcommittee and key district administrators should discuss the progress of the district's legislative priorities and/or key legislation and strategize about how to help the district's legislators move that legislation through the process. Open Meetings Act procedures should be followed, as necessary. NMSBA can provide written legislative updates, as well as bill summaries, to help board members monitor the progress of legislation that will affect New Mexico school districts. Legislative updates are e-mailed to all board members throughout the session.

H. Ongoing Throughout Session: Contact district's association partners

Throughout the session, the board's legislative subcommittee should contact the NMSBA Executive Director or Legislative Liaison at (505) 983-5041 and the district's other association partners regarding the sharing of information and the education of decision-makers and staff.

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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 your 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.