



# Primer for Public Advocacy

Take Your Advocacy to the  
Next Level

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## Take Your Advocacy to the Next Level

**NSBA is pleased to offer this targeted messaging mini-guide.**

NSBA is striving to become the leading advocate for public education in America. Achieving this mission involves growing a national network of public education advocates that will take action to promote the good work of school boards and public schools. This motivated and inspired network will serve as the backbone of NSBA's national campaign.

Yet a national campaign can only go so far. School board members and our state school boards associations will piggyback on the campaign to support the public schools in their communities and address local issues. A national effort, coupled with state and local initiatives, takes time, commitment and strategic planning, but it is capable of delivering meaningful, long-term results.

Sustained advocacy is crucial because public education and school boards are facing more scrutiny—and criticism—than ever. There is much work to do to effectively counter the critics of public education and local school board governance.

NSBA sees that more federal regulations, greater student needs, and fewer funds and resources are impacting school districts' abilities to provide

consistently strong services for all students. There are increasingly aggressive efforts to erode our public school system and local governance through budget cuts, unfunded mandates, vouchers, and ill-defined school choice plans, many backed by “Big Money” interests.

We must set the record straight with lawmakers, corporate and community leaders, and the public at large. When education is bought and sold, it jeopardizes student achievement and our economy, siphoning off taxpayer dollars intended to support local public schools. **It is time to focus on student achievement, not profiteering.**

NSBA believes that a strong public education system is vital for students to compete in an increasingly competitive global market and sustain our nation's economic future.

This guide is designed to help school board members learn the basic elements of public advocacy and build a simple plan. It will help you mobilize your advocates, assess your needs, shape messages, use those messages consistently, and add your voice to NSBA's national network of advocates for greater effect.

**We welcome feedback on this mini-guide. Please send any comments or suggestions to [pa4@nsba.org](mailto:pa4@nsba.org).**

### “Take It to the Streets” with National Connection's Public Engagement Toolkit



**Ready to “move the needle” in ways that drive community engagement? Need tips, tools and resources informed by “best practices” that can help to advance and accelerate your outreach efforts? Then seek out National Connection's Public Engagement Toolkit.**

This implementation-focused guide offers tips, techniques and resources essential for school boards to build trust and credibility and counter negative information about public education and school boards. The Public Engagement Toolkit, available only through National Connection, contains Message Map Templates, tips on crafting

key messages, tools for identifying stakeholders, a focus group facilitators' guide, and many other resources and products essential to drive engagement.

When you take part in National Connection, a partnership between state school boards associations and NSBA, you'll receive the toolkit and many other premium resources to keep your district moving

forward. Your school district's participation is critical to NSBA's success as a strong advocacy voice for public education and local school board governance.

To learn more and enroll your district, visit [www.nsba.org/getconnected](http://www.nsba.org/getconnected).

National Connection: A partnership program of state school boards associations and NSBA

# Getting involved

A public advocacy campaign cannot succeed without a network of supporters—that means YOU. You may already have years of experience as a member of NSBA’s Federal Relations Network, or you may be newly elected to your local school board. Regardless, NSBA needs you to take part in its ‘army of advocates’—those “brand ambassadors” willing to lead campaigns in their own communities.

A brand ambassador is a person—not necessarily a celebrity—who will embody the values of a group or corporation and promote its products or cause. Often, the best brand ambassadors are school officials and school board members who have in-depth field experience with the messages they are conveying, which adds to their credibility. For NSBA’s campaign, we need brand ambassadors in every community across the country to speak with the same messages about the global importance of public education and school board governance. Coordinated with a state or community campaign, a brand ambassador can localize the national message by tailoring content to highlight specific local accomplishments and needs and district- and school-level priorities.

Keep in mind, a public advocacy campaign is not a quick fix. It is a long-term, year-round effort that requires dedication, commitment, and often patience from its supporters. It takes time to build relationships with lawmakers and community leaders and earn the trust of the public. And message delivery takes time and persistence to overcome inertia, resonate consistently, and ‘break through’ competing noise.

# The process

This ‘continuous cycle’ graphic shows the basic flow and lifecycle of a public advocacy campaign. Begin with the appraisal and start with the question, “What is the desired outcome?” Once you have determined the outcome, you must focus on getting there by identifying and analyzing issues. This leads to the important step of mobilizing your supporters and identifying key stakeholders who can help achieve the end result. Plan strategically, then take those identified actions. Finally, be sure to monitor and evaluate the results and adjust the strategy as needed.



# Defining what to say: The importance of a Message Framework

A Message Framework (also called a Message Box) is a tool that helps school boards keep everyone on the same page and develop concise messaging. It ensures consistency in verbal and written communications and helps avoid message fragmentation.

The process of building a Message Framework helps your school board focus on what you want to say—the core statement—and hone your talking points, which support your core message. This type of framework helps deliver the best message rapidly and effectively.

Key messages should be concise, strategic, relevant, compelling, simple, memorable, and tailored to your audience. Keep in mind that a Message Framework is a living document and can be adjusted as situations evolve.

## Sample Message Framework

### CORE STATEMENT

**A strong public school system, run by locally selected school board members, is essential for our students' and our nation's future.**

#### **Key Message: Student Achievement**

Guided by school boards, public schools are making significant strides in educating increasingly diverse student populations. School boards are committed to the success of every child.

#### **Key Message: Vision and Values**

Public schools reflect the vision and values of a local community because school boards drive district goal-setting and build programs and policies.

#### **Key Message: Accountability**

Public schools are being held accountable for their students' success, and school boards ensure key administrators are performing their jobs well and meeting the community's goals.

#### **Key Message: Parent and Community Engagement**

A strong public school system thrives on parent and community involvement, and school boards can play a key role in connecting parents and communities to public education.

# Developing your “Elevator Speech”

From a Message Framework, you can develop an Elevator Speech: a short statement that describes your issue in about 10 seconds or three sentences. It is designed to engage and educate your audiences who may know little or nothing about school boards and public schools and it does so by presenting your audiences with a few key points, grabbing their attention, and making them want to learn more.

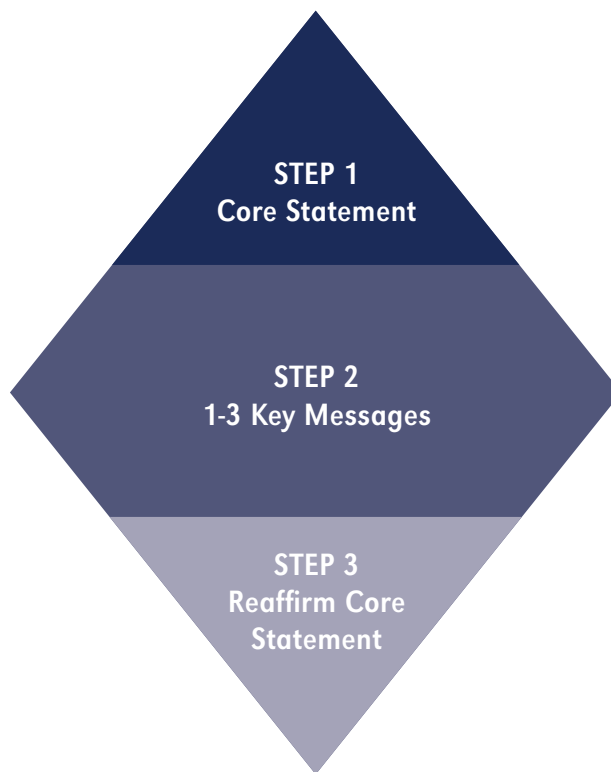
Imagine yourself at the state capitol, and finding yourself in an elevator with a key lawmaker. What will you say?

## NSBA’s sample Elevator Speech:

As locally elected school board members, it is our vision that the nation’s public schools will prepare each child to reach his or her potential in life. All students will have the knowledge and skills to compete and ensure that America remains strong as a democracy and in the global marketplace.

## Message Diamond: Building your case

A Message Diamond helps construct your argument when speaking about your cause or answering questions. Similar to the Message Framework, the Message Diamond begins with your core statement. You then support it with one to three key messages, and then restate your core statement. This is a way to ensure that your message is properly conveyed—and that it sticks. It is VERY different from day-to-day informal conversation—in fact, it inverts it. A Message Diamond structure puts the core statement up front—defends it with one to three “key messages”—and then reaffirms the core statement at the end to ‘book-end’ the message.



**TIP:** Think of your role as the “teacher.” The person asking the question is the “class.” The content of your message diamond is the “lesson.”

# Bridging and Pivoting: Addressing the tough questions

Not everyone gets the chance to say exactly what they want. Sometimes we are questioned or challenged about the core message. The acts of “bridging” and “pivoting” allow you to redirect the conversation to what YOU want to discuss.

A “bridge” acknowledges the question that is being asked—it does not dodge a question. The response then reframes that question and pivots the topic as a way to move the conversation to your messaging.

One exception: If a reporter or constituent asks a question that is sensationalist or uninformed, do not repeat or address the question. Make a comment such as “That’s an important point... the bigger issue is...” Do not say, “No comment.” If you do not have the information, offer to find out and follow up, and then do so. If you are not authorized to speak on a matter, refer a reporter or constituent to the person who is.

Another important rule is to know the arguments your opposition is making: You must be able to counter those points.

## Example

The governor of your state thinks school boards are obsolete because a growing number of K-12 education regulations come from the state and federal governments. At a recent meeting with mayors and town leaders, he says that mayoral control of local schools is a better model. A local television reporter wants your school board’s reaction, and you are the designated spokesperson.

### How to ‘bridge’ to tell your story:

**Q:** *Why do we need school boards when most regulations are now made at the state and federal government levels?*

**A: Bridge** “You’ve brought up an important topic in school governance. The bigger issue is, federal and state regulations are encroaching on local schools and hindering local school officials’ ability to effectively do their jobs...”

**Pivot** “Because of this encroachment, school boards are needed more than ever to ensure that our public schools are linked to the local community. A school board’s responsibilities, which cannot be replicated at the state or federal levels, mirror those of any corporate or non-profit board: setting clear goals especially around student achievement, establishing accountability, ensuring financial stewardship, hiring and holding the superintendent accountable, and working with the community to ensure all students succeed.”

**Restate Point** “School boards are needed to focus exclusively on their communities’ public schools—a mayor, state agency, or other body cannot provide exclusive attention.”

**TIP:** Before sitting down for an on-camera interview, always introduce yourself to everyone in the room and reconfirm the topic to be discussed—you don’t want to be surprised!



# Social Media: Digital tools are essential to any campaign

Start the conversation in your community by using social media. You can participate in social media to share and promote your positive messages about public education. Successful social media initiatives:

1. Are focused and have a clear message or requested action;
2. Are engaging and will encourage others to connect and share;
3. Stand out from the crowd with a unique, relevant, and powerful message that will draw attention;
4. Share your personal story and passion.

Also consider adding images when posting a message on social media: Photos, graphics, and videos help highlight your message.

A message posted on social media can be very powerful and can quickly go viral. Just think... you have 300 friends and if each of your friends shares your message with their 300 friends, your message would be viewed by **90,000 individuals** within a matter of hours!

## Getting started: What you can do

### In 30 minutes:

- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper or blog commenting on an education story.
- Contact a reporter to promote a good-news story from your local public schools.
- Read the latest research on public education at NSBA's Center for Public Education ([www.centerforpubliceducation.org](http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org)).

### In 3 hours:

- Get informed: Study NSBA's National Campaign messages at ([www.standup4publicschools.org](http://www.standup4publicschools.org)) and make these messages your own.
- Attend a media training session to learn how to become a better spokesperson for your school board.
- Open a social media account to promote your work.
- Arrange to talk to a civic club, church group, or other community organization about some of the key initiatives in your schools.
- Identify key influencers—those important individuals or active community, civic, business, social, and faith-based organizations, as well as informal groups that also influence public opinion.

### In 30 hours:

- Gather research and data and write a plan of action for your school board to proactively handle a controversial issue or critics.
- Attend NSBA and state school board association conferences and learn how other school board members are handling similar issues.
- Research your opponents' positions and prepare your counterpoints to refute those positions.
- Research and write success stories from your school district and disseminate through social media. (Suggested reading: NSBA's "Telling Your Story: A Communications Guide for School Boards" at [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org).)

### In 30 days:

- Use social media to connect to key business and civic leaders in the community and keep them informed of positive news from your schools.
- Monitor legislative activity in Congress and your state legislature.
- Set up appointments to meet with elected representatives.



[www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)

[www.standup4publicschools.org](http://www.standup4publicschools.org)



## Do's and Don'ts of message delivery

**DO:** Keep your message simple—focus on the Message Framework and repeat. Staying on message will make your opportunity much more effective.

**DON'T:** Use education jargon or technical terms that the general public may not understand. (Example: Talk about federal special education spending instead of IDEA Part B grants to states.)

**DO:** Focus on students and student achievement, not on adults.

**DON'T:** Imply or suggest that public schools do not need to change.

**DO:** Illustrate your points with personal stories where relevant. Use data sparingly to support your points. Example: Our high school graduation rate has increased 10 percent in the three years since the school board has focused on career programs.)

**DON'T:** Weigh down your key messages with too much data (example: Our high school graduation rate increased from 84.1 percent to 86.9 percent from 2010 to 2012). Narratives are more memorable than numbers.

**DO:** Position your school board as a change agent.

**DON'T:** Further the impression that NSBA or school boards support the status quo.

**DO:** Address the hard questions and then bridge to address your key points.

**DON'T:** Avoid questions or get drawn into a debate around the opposing side's message. Do not echo the critics' language. It gives their message added credence. Playing defense winds up defusing your message—the conversation must be on your terms.

**DO:** Focus on intended outcomes.

**DON'T:** Say more than you intend simply to fill 'dead air.' It can take you off-message. Exercise control. Never appear defensive, confrontational, or angry.

**DO:** Engage like-minded partners to carry your message. Take the time and effort to build coalitions.

**DON'T:** Assume that every partner who knows the issues is able to effectively communicate the core messages in media and to the public.





[www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)

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