



TSBA

Tennessee School Boards Association



ADVOCACY GUIDE

***A Guide to Influencing
Education***



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Introduction

As a school board member, you work every day as an advocate for public education in your community. At each board meeting, crucial decisions that affect the lives of children are made as you determine the needs of the students and families you serve. However, are those needs being communicated to your elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels? If not, you may find your Board having to revise or even reverse practices because decisions are made each year by these officials that will impact your district.

Importance of the Role

As a school board member, you are charged with the responsibility and duty to communicate the needs of public education. You are in an excellent position to inform and influence policy makers on key issues. As we work together, your participation in the process is vital to encourage everyone to support local decision-making, oppose unfunded state mandates, and fully fund public education.

Your Advocacy Produces Results

You can make a drastic difference and have a significant impact on the legislative process. Remember, being on your local Board of Education, you share a common bond with members of other elected bodies. They know you have been elected to advocate for the educational needs of your community. They must hear from you about how their decisions will impact the classroom.

A great line in the Declaration of Independence reads, “Governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed.” Elected officials are in office to help their districts and to help you, their constituents. If you don’t stand up and tell them how to improve education in your community, be assured that someone else will.

A Blueprint for Effective Advocacy

The purpose of this guide is to encourage and assist you in influencing education at every level. It is surprisingly simple to make your voice heard when you make advocacy a year-round part of your service as a school board member. By using the resources provided through TSBA and through the development of your own strategy, you can strengthen your political voice and make a positive difference in the lives of Tennessee’s students.



How a Bill Becomes Law at the State Level

In order to effectively influence legislators, it is important to understand the law-making process. It is easy for those unfamiliar with the General Assembly to get lost in the madness of a typical legislative session. However, with careful study and practice, the process will become clear which will lead to better planning and reduce the surprises.

The following steps represent the normal path a bill follows on its way to becoming Tennessee law.

Bill Introduction

The Tennessee Constitution requires all bills to be considered and passed on three different days in each house (House of Representatives or Senate). A legislator may introduce a bill in his/her respective house by filing it with the appropriate Chief Clerk who then assigns the bill a number.

Passed on First and Second Consideration

Generally, all bills are passed on first and second consideration without objection and without debate and then referred by the Speaker to the appropriate committee.

Committee Assignment

After a bill has been referred to a committee for consideration, a hearing may be held where the merits of the bill will be debated. Much of the lobbying activity on a particular piece of legislation occurs before this committee hearing is held. Committee members are briefed by advocates on both sides of the issue. If your legislator serves on the committee scheduled to debate the legislation, this is an ideal time for you to contact him/her and voice support or opposition. For a bill to move out of a Senate Committee, it must receive an affirmative vote from a majority of the members. For a bill to move out of a House Committee, it must receive an affirmative vote of a majority of the members present.

The committee chairmen report committee action to the Chief Clerk. All bills recommended for passage by the committee are referred to another standing committee (if required or requested) or the scheduling committee - the House Committee on Calendar and Rules or the Senate Calendar Committee.

Referred to Calendar

The House Committee on Calendar and Rules is primarily composed of House leadership and the chairmen of standing committees. This committee sets the floor calendar and establishes the schedule



of meetings of the various standing committees. Unlike the Senate Calendar Committee, the House Calendar and Rules Committee debates the merits of legislation, and it has considerable power because it determines whether a bill will reach the floor at all. In the Senate, the Calendar Committee is simply a scheduling body, and all bills are scheduled on the Senate Floor without objection.

Passed on Third Consideration

When a bill appears on the floor calendar, it is considered on third consideration. It is open to debate and potential amendments by the entire body of the house considering it. Prior to this floor session, debate is essentially the last opportunity for all board members to contact their legislators. In order to pass each body, a Constitutional majority (majority of the entire body) is required - 50 votes in the House; 17 votes in the Senate.

Companion Bills

Identical bills must be filed in each body, and these are called “companion bills.” The bills will travel through the legislative process of each body at its own pace, but both bills must reach their respective Floors in order to have a chance to become law. If one body passes a bill in a different form from the other body, the two bodies will review each other’s version and attempt to reach agreement.

Conference Committees

If no agreement is reached on the differing versions of legislation, the bill goes to a conference committee which is made up of legislators from each body who are selected by the two Speakers. In order for the conference committee to reach agreement, a majority of the House and a majority of the Senate appointees must cast an affirmative vote. If agreement is reached, this “majority report” will be brought before each body where a Constitutional majority is required for ultimate passage.

Signed by Governor

After passing both houses, a bill is transmitted to the Governor for his action. The Governor may sign a bill, veto it, or allow it to become law without his signature. The Governor is allowed ten days, excluding Sundays, to approve or veto a bill. If he takes no action within that period, the bill becomes a law without his signature.

If the Legislature is still in session, the Governor returns all bills and joint resolutions to the house of origin after he has taken action. After adjournment of the General Assembly, the Governor returns bills to the Office of the Secretary of State. If the Governor has vetoed a bill, the veto can be overridden by a majority vote of the membership of each house.

Portions of the information summarized in this section were provided by Legislative Information Services.

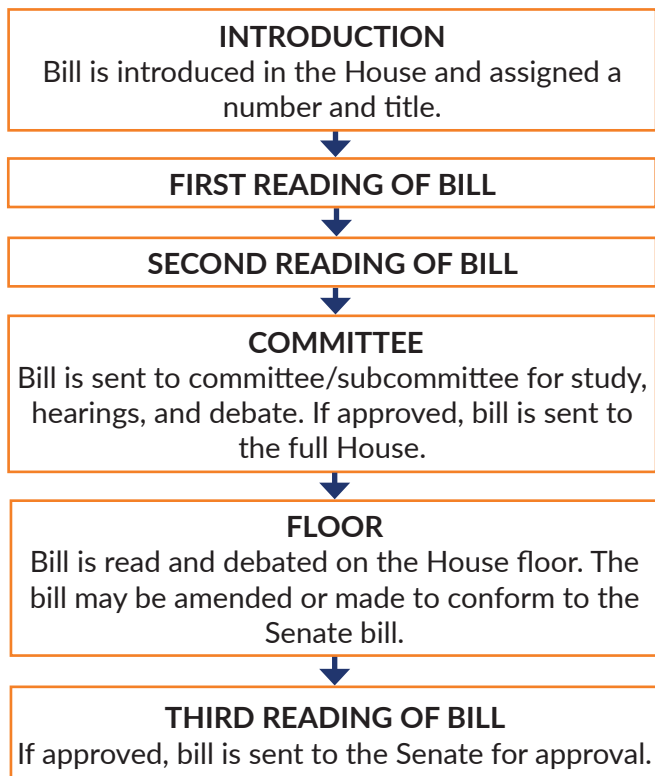


How a Bill Becomes Law - The State Process

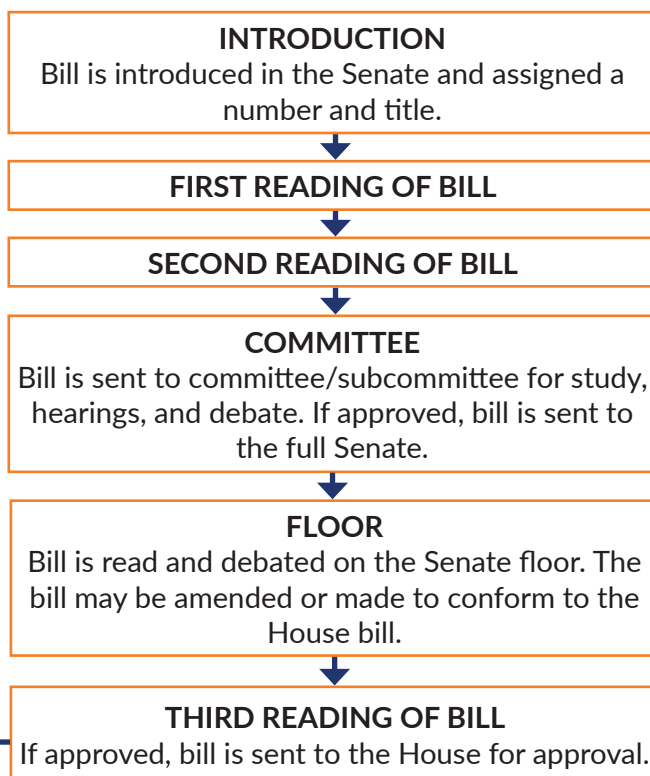
DRAFT OF BILL

Bill is drafted by members of the General Assembly, the Executive Branch, or outside groups.

House of Representatives



Senate



VERSION OF BILL

Identical versions of the bill must be passed by both the House and the Senate. To resolve any differences, the bill will go to a conference committee.

SIGNED BY SPEAKERS

The Speaker of the Senate and the Speaker of the House sign the bill.

GOVERNOR

Signs the bill

Vetoes the bill

Does not sign the bill into law within ten days

General Assembly can override a veto by a majority vote in both houses.

BILL BECOMES LAW.



How a Bill Becomes Law at the Federal Level

The work of Congress is initiated by the introduction of a proposal in one of four principal forms: the bill, the joint resolution, the concurrent resolution, and the simple resolution.

Bill

A bill is the form used for most legislation, whether permanent or temporary, general or special, public or private. A bill originating in the House of Representatives is designated by the letters “H.R.,” signifying “House of Representatives,” followed by a number that it retains throughout all of its parliamentary stages. Bills are presented to the President for action when approved in identical form by both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Joint Resolutions

Joint resolutions may originate either in the House of Representatives or in the Senate. There is little practical difference between a bill and a joint resolution. Both are subject to the same procedure, except for a joint resolution proposing an amendment to the Constitution. On approval of such a resolution by two-thirds of both the House and Senate, it is sent directly to the Administrator of General Services for submission to the individual states for ratification. It is not presented to the President for approval. A joint resolution originating in the House of Representatives is designated “H.J.Res.” followed by its individual number. Joint resolutions become law in the same manner as bills.

Concurrent Resolutions

Matters affecting the operations of both the House of Representatives and Senate are usually initiated by means of concurrent resolutions. A concurrent resolution originating in the House of Representatives is designated “H.Con.Res.” followed by its individual number. On approval by both the House of Representatives and Senate, they are signed by the Clerk of the House and the Secretary of the Senate. They are not presented to the President for action.

Simple Resolutions

A matter concerning the operation of either the House of Representatives or Senate alone is initiated by a simple resolution. A resolution affecting the House of Representatives is designated “H.Res.” followed by its number. They are not presented to the President for action.



Introduction and Referral to Committee

Any member in the House of Representatives may introduce a bill at any time while the House is in session by simply placing it in the “hopper” at the side of the Clerk’s desk in the House Chamber. The sponsor’s signature must appear on the bill. A public bill may have an unlimited number of co-sponsoring members. The bill is assigned its legislative number by the Clerk and referred to the appropriate committee by the Speaker, with the assistance of the Parliamentarian. The bill is then printed in its introduced form, which you can read in Bill Text. An important phase of the legislative process is the action taken by committees. It is during committee action that the most intense consideration is given to the proposed measures and is also the time when the people are given the opportunity to be heard. Each piece of legislation is referred to the committee that has jurisdiction over the area affected by the measure.

Consideration by Committee

Public Hearings and Markup Sessions

Usually the first step in this process is a public hearing, where the committee members hear witnesses representing various viewpoints on the measure. Each committee makes public the date, place, and subject of any hearing it conducts. The committee meetings scheduled are available along with other House schedules. Public announcements are also published in the Daily Digest portion of the Congressional Record.

A transcript of the testimony taken at a hearing is made available for inspection in the committee office, and frequently, the complete transcript is printed and distributed by the committee.

After hearings are completed, the bill is considered in a session that is popularly known as the “markup” session. Members of the committee study the viewpoints presented in detail. Amendments may be offered to the bill, and the committee members vote to accept or reject these changes.

This process can take place at either the subcommittee level or the full committee level, or at both. Hearings and markup sessions are status steps noted in the Legislative Action portion of Bill Status.

Committee Action

At the conclusion of deliberation, a vote of committee or subcommittee members is taken to determine what action to take on the measure. It can be reported, with or without amendment, or tabled which means no further action on it will occur. If the committee has approved extensive amendments, they may decide to report a new bill incorporating all the amendments. This is known as a “clean bill”, which will have a new number. Votes in committee can be found in Committee Votes.

If the committee votes to report a bill, the Committee Report is written. This report describes the purpose and scope of the measure and the reasons for recommended approval. House Report numbers are prefixed with “H.Rpt.” and then a number indicating the Congress.



House Floor Consideration

Consideration of a measure by the full House can be a simple or very complex operation. In general, a measure is ready for consideration by the full House after it has been reported by a committee. Under certain circumstances, it may be brought to the Floor directly. The consideration of a measure may be governed by a “rule”. A rule is a simple resolution which must be passed by the House that sets out the particulars of debate for a specific bill, how much time will be allowed for debate, whether amendments can be offered, and other matters.

Debate time for a measure is normally divided between proponents and opponents. Each side yields time to those members who wish to speak on the bill. When amendments are offered, these are also debated and voted upon. If the House is in session, there will be a summary of Current House Floor Proceedings. After all debate is concluded and amendments decided upon, the House is ready to vote on final passage. In some cases, a vote to “recommit” the bill to committee is requested. This is usually an effort by opponents to change some portion or table the measure. If the attempt to recommit fails, a vote on final passage is ordered.

Votes on final passage, as well as all other votes in the House, may be taken by the electronic voting system which registers each individual member’s response. These votes are referred to as Yea/Nay votes or recorded votes and are available in House Votes by bill number, roll call vote number, or words describing the reason for the vote. Votes in the House may also be by voice vote, and no record of individual responses is available.

Senate Action

After a measure passes in the House, it goes to the Senate for consideration. A bill must pass both bodies in the same form before it can be presented to the President for signature into law.

Resolving Differences

If the Senate changes the language of the measure, it must return to the House for concurrence or additional changes. This back-and-forth negotiation may occur on the House floor, with the House accepting or rejecting Senate amendments or complete Senate text. Often a conference committee will be appointed with both House and Senate members. This group will resolve the differences in committee and report the identical measure back to both bodies for a vote. Conference committees also issue reports outlining the final version of the bill.

Consideration by the President

After a measure has been passed in identical form by both the House and Senate, it is considered “enrolled”. It is sent to the President who may sign the measure into law, veto it and return it to Congress, let it become law without signature, or at the end of a session, pocket-veto it.



How a Bill Becomes Law - The Federal Process

DRAFT OF BILL

Bill is drafted by members of Congress, the Executive Branch, or outside groups.

House of Representatives

INTRODUCTION

Bill is introduced in the House and assigned a number and title.

COMMITTEE

Bill is sent to committee/subcommittee for study, hearings, and debate. If approved, bill is sent to the full House.

FLOOR

Bill is read and debated on the House floor. If approved, bill is sent to the Senate.

Senate

INTRODUCTION

Bill is introduced in the Senate and assigned a number and title.

COMMITTEE

Bill is sent to committee/subcommittee for study, hearings, and debate. If approved, bill is sent to the full Senate.

FLOOR

Bill is read and debated on the Senate floor. If approved, bill is sent to the House.

VERSION OF BILL

Identical versions of the bill must be passed by both the House and the Senate. To resolve any differences, the bill will go to a conference committee.

IDENTICAL VERSIONS

Versions of the bill are identical.

CONFERENCE COMMITTEE

The committee resolves differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The revised bill is sent back to both houses for final approval before sending to the President.

PRESIDENT

Does not sign the bill into law within ten days

Signs the bill

Vetoes the bill

If Congress is in session

Congress can override a veto by a two-thirds vote in both houses.

BILL BECOMES LAW.



Six Steps to Effectively Advocate for Public Education

Step 1: Know the Issues

Both you and your Board must know and understand local, state, and national issues concerning school districts. More importantly, you must understand the the proposals and the potential effect they may have on your district. Take advantage of TSBA's Legislative Services and create opportunities for public input.

Receive the Information

Make sure you receive the information you need to make decisions. Read TSBA's Legislative Notes and the supplemental materials and information found on the TSBA website. This includes TSBA's legislative agenda and position statements. You can also attend TSBA's Legislative and Legal Institute event. Finally, TSBA's BoardTalk provides regular updates on education issues throughout the year.

Include Advocacy in your Board Meetings

Include a regular item on your board meeting agenda to review current local, state, and federal issues and discuss their impacts on the district and how the Board should respond. The district should receive information from state agencies such as the Tennessee Department of Education and should prepare regular reports to the Board and community. Finally, respond to TSBA's calls to action and requests for information.

Create Opportunities for Public Input

Encourage formal and informal public input through public comments at board meetings, hearings, and community listening events at other locations in your district. Provide structured opportunities for the public to listen and speak on key issues. This could include holding public forums on specific public and legislative issues concerning your district.



Step 2: Know Where your Board Stands

Through participation in TSBA's advocacy programs and events, your Board can help set the Association's legislative priorities. Each Board's ideas, concerns, and recommendations are extremely important. Each Board should examine the school system it governs and set its own legislative priorities. It is very likely that the needs of your Board are very similar to the needs of other Boards across the state.

Develop and Submit Resolutions

Have a process to adopt positions on major issues and policies. Each year, TSBA's legislative agenda is based on resolutions and position statements that are adopted by the Delegate Assembly at the Annual Convention. A resolution is a proposal that asks TSBA to take a certain position or action on an issue. The resolution should address a timely issue that affects public education. Position statements are the Association's overall governing policies. Boards can have their legislative priorities studied, addressed, and considered by the Association by submitting resolutions for consideration. If legislative action could improve public education in your district, then more than likely, it could help many other school districts as well. Resolutions submitted by Boards should contain a clear request and a rationale for such request. While position statements remain in effect until modified or deleted, annual approval is necessary for resolutions to remain in effect.

Board Positions Versus Personal Opinions

There may be occasions where the position taken by the Board as a body is in conflict with your own personal beliefs or opinions. In these instances, it can be difficult to advocate a particular issue. Always keep in mind that you are advocating for the Board as a unified body. While each individual board member represents a portion of the district, the Board must stand united with advocacy. If you find yourself talking to officials about your individual views, make sure they understand that you are not speaking on behalf of the Board.



Step 3: Know your District

Gain a clear understanding of the impact state and federal actions will have on your district based upon the characteristics of your students, families, economic interests, and region. Share this information with legislators, district staff, and community advocates.

Create a Report on District Characteristics

Each school district is different, so the impact of a specific proposal could have on your district may not be the same as other districts throughout the state. Work with district staff to create a report on the key facts about your district, compared to state and regional averages. The following are some factors to consider:

- Current enrollment, trends, and projections;
- Characteristics of students and the impact on special needs and program costs, including special education, low income or at-risk, limited English proficiency, vocational/career and technical education, transportation costs, and turnover;
- Student achievement measures, state and local assessments, graduation rates, and college and career preparation;
- Curricular and extracurricular programs offered by the district and special programs and services (preschools, virtual schools, alternative schools, and others);
- Joint programs and services provided with other districts, local government, higher education, the military, and others;
- Budget trends (total and per-pupil spending, major categories of revenue and expenditures, state aid versus local revenues under current formulas, federal funding, etc.);
- Employees, salaries and benefits, and teacher contracts;
- Budget allocations: district spending on major budget categories (instruction, student and teacher support, administration, operations and maintenance, transportation, food service, capital expenditures and debt service, cash balances and reserves);
- Potential changes in district structure (change in number or use of existing buildings, district consolidation, or cooperative agreements with other districts); and
- Economic trends in your district (population change, employment, major employers, impact of schools, etc.).



Step 4: Reach Out to the Public

You can provide the public, both voters in general and key opinion leaders, with information that encourages them to support your positions. You can communicate with key stakeholders at board meetings and share your opinion with the media. Get involved in community groups that support public education.

Communicate Positions Internally and Externally

Resolutions and position statements must be communicated to the public. Brief your teachers and other district groups on the issues, including your district's goals. Invite key leaders of your community (business leaders, local officials, service club members, PTA members, church leaders, etc.) to a meeting on how your school district is responding to national and state requirements as well as local needs and values. Discuss how proposals will affect your schools and community. Consider joint meetings with other districts or your funding bodies to review district positions, learn about other interests, and seek common goals and strategies. Place a discussion of the issues or communication with officials on each board meeting's agenda so the press can report it. Include information on key issues in district publications or special mailings to stakeholders. You do not need to lobby in these publications – just present the facts and the Board's position.

Share your Message with the Public

Ask to write a guest column or send a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. Offer to appear and participate in radio/TV programs or call-in shows or contribute to blogs on issues concerning the district and its positions. Volunteer to have the Superintendent/Director of Schools, board chairman, or legislative liaison speak to community organizations. Prepare media releases and provide interviews with news outlets. You can use the information that TSBA provides to supplement your own materials.

Organize an Advocacy Group

Set up regular meetings and activities for school leaders and community members who want to support public education in your community and statewide. Include representatives of teacher or parent organizations, plus other supportive parents and stakeholders. Create a school district advocacy team or network of interested parents and stakeholders to communicate concerns about local, state, and federal policy issues.



Activate Your Network

As you continue to organize your network and reach out to those in your community, it is important to remember to develop ways to contact those who want to advocate for public education. Activating your network could be a short email or a detailed brief. Below are a few examples of how you can activate your network in you local community:

- Emails via a distribution list
- Phone calls
- Action alerts
- Mailings
- Presentations
- Position statements
- Letters to the Editor
- Community newspapers
- Community meetings
- School board meetings

Using the Media

Make an effort to meet regularly with the reporters who cover your district. This might mean visiting their offices, getting together for lunch, making a point to chat with them at community (not school-related) affairs, or have a media briefing. Ask for – and listen to – what reporters have to say about your district. These people are in close contact with many facets of your community and probably have a good feel for what the community thinks about various educational issues and programs. Watch, listen, and read the media that cover your district so you are familiar with their formats. Periodically call or email and tell a reporter when he/she did a good job.

Keep in mind that the media isn't in business to help you with your communications needs. It is in business to (1) make money and (2) disseminate news. News is information that is of interest to the public. Some of the information you'll need to disseminate to the public isn't news, and you shouldn't expect it to be used by the news media. On the other hand, many opportunities for news are often overlooked because they aren't brought to the media's attention in a newsworthy manner or usable format.



Social Media

Journalism is transforming itself into a new digital form that looks and behaves differently than traditional models. Digital technologies have altered the manner in which the traditional news industry produces and disseminates information. Through the emergence of the Internet, social media, blogs, electronic news readers, smart phones, and cell phone texting, the cost of information transmission has dropped, and the vehicles for communication have expanded dramatically. New content providers have found novel ways of delivering information to students, parents, and the general public.

Social media can provide instant, low-cost access to thousands of people in a matter of seconds. It integrates technology, social interaction, and the sharing of words, images, video, and audio in an instant. In other words, social media is an online conversation. If you do not have a social media presence, then you are missing an opportunity to communicate with your network.

When you communicate with social media, always remember that each platform is a way to reach a different portion of your network. Below is a list of social media sites and some of their major functions:

Facebook

- Status updates
- Picture albums
- Videos
- Private messaging
- Commenting
- Organizing groups and events

Twitter

- Status updates
- Tagging
- Pictures
- Short videos
- Private messaging

Instagram

- Individual pictures
- Tagging

LinkedIn

- Online resume
- Networking
- Organizing groups
- Commenting
- Professional site

YouTube

- Videos
- Comments
- Channel subscriptions



The Elevator Speech

As a public education advocate, you should have an “elevator speech” prepared that can be given in the time it takes to ride an elevator. The elevator speech is comprised of a two-three minute story about the importance of an issue in your local community, supported by a couple of key facts. Always remember to present yourself and your position clearly and succinctly. Take the time to practice with others, and use their feedback to adjust your speech.

Sample Elevator Speech

Citizen: “I know you from somewhere. Are you on the local Board of Education?”

Board Member: “Yes I am! I’m a member of the _____ Board of Education.”

Citizen: “I wouldn’t want your job. Public schools are....”

Board Member: “Actually, I have the best job in the world. At _____ County Schools, we recognize that every child is going to need an advanced education beyond high school, so we’re making sure our students experience a college-bound culture at school and at home.”

Citizen: “How do you do that?”

Board Member: “Every chance we get, we talk about college and what it takes to get into good schools today. We find that, when students know we expect more out of them, they tend to deliver. The same is true for parents, teachers, and principals. That’s why 95 percent of our students graduate from high school and get accepted into the colleges they choose more often than students from other schools. We have the data to prove it.”

Citizen: “Wow. Sounds impressive, but aren’t parents today part of the problem?”

Board Member: “Our parents care deeply about their children’s success, and they help us make important decisions about our schools. We couldn’t do it without them.”

Citizen: “Really? I thought you had a lot of poor families in your community.”

Board Member: “We do, but they understand that education will make a difference for their children or grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. They still want and deserve the best, and we give it to them. In fact, our parent workshops are so good that we’ve had 20 parents decide to go back to school or college to finish up their degrees.

Citizen: “But I thought your schools have a lot of problems with violence and drugs.”



Board Member: “Who told you that? You can’t believe everything you see on the news or hear from others. If you’d like to come visit one of our schools and find out what’s really going on, give me a call or email me. I’ll set it up for you. In the meantime, here are some facts about our schools. Maybe you can help me set the record straight about how well our public schools are working in our community.” (Hands card with contact information, website, social media outlets on one side, “wow” facts about the issues, and a QR code that links to the district’s website on the other side.) “Do you have a card? I can get you on our key communicator list if you’d like.”

Citizen: “What’s a key communicator?”

Board Members: “It’s someone who gets email updates about our schools and is willing to share that information with someone they know. Key communicators also commit to contacting us anytime they hear a rumor, so we can help correct the facts.”

Citizen: “Well, I don’t think I’m ready for the key communicator program, although it sounds like a good idea. You can put me on your distribution list, though. I’ve enjoyed our conversation, and good luck to you!”

Board Member: “Thank you. And remember, our public schools work, from cradle to college or career.”



Step 5: Know your Elected Officials

Before you can effectively convey the educational needs and priorities of your community, you need to know your legislators. Develop relationships with elected officials in your capacity as an individual voter as well as a school board member.

Create Personal Relationships

Get personal. Knowing some personal information can help you develop relationships and relate to them. As a local resident, you already share a common understanding of the places, events, and interests of your community. It is likely that you know some of the same people, have the same profession, or attended the same school. All of this information will assist you in developing relationships. You can start by introducing yourself by phone, email, or letter and request a personal meeting. Present yourself as a concerned constituent, fellow elected official, and source for information on educational issues.

Build Relationships Between your District and Elected Representatives

Set up meetings with funding bodies, state officials, and/or federal officials. Invite them to discuss issues at a regular or special board meeting. Ask them to visit your schools, share your successes, explain your concerns, and give each of them buy-in and a connection to your district.

Build Relationships with Other Leaders

Host or participate in a joint meeting of several Boards in your county or area. Identify and collaborate with local leaders who understand and value public education and who are willing to communicate with elected officials and opinion leaders.

Committees

Know the committees on which your legislators serve. Pay particular attention to whether or not they serve on the Education Committees. If your legislators do not serve on the Education Committees, they may not know about an issue when you contact them. If they are on the Education Committees, you can bet that they have heard from the opposing side, so your approach needs to include countering opposing arguments. You always want to plan your approach around your audience, and knowing the committee assignments will enable you to shape your message. It is also very important to know when each committee meets and what bills are scheduled on the committee calendar. Tracking this information will allow you to communicate your positions on particular pieces of legislation to your representative or senator in a timely and relevant manner.



Staff

Know staff within each of the offices of your elected officials. Staffers can be very valuable to your advocacy work, and they may be your greatest asset because they can secure you the time to communicate your positions to your elected official.

You should always treat staff with courtesy and respect and get to know them by name. The benefits of developing a friendly, personal relationship with staff members are immeasurable and can often make all the difference in determining whether or not you get to communicate your position before the final vote.



Step 6: Contact your Elected Officials

Local, state, and federal officials collectively discuss thousands of issues each year, and they cannot possibly know all of the implications. That is why they depend on advocates to provide clear and relevant information on issues. They know that you know how policies will affect students in the classroom, and they should grow to value your judgement and advice. However, the method, tone, and timeliness of your communication can often determine whether or not they use your advice when casting their vote.

Speak on Behalf of your Constituents

Most elected officials want to hear more from constituents and “regular citizens.” Speak on behalf of your constituents rather than a “special interest.” Discuss how the issue will affect your district as you see it. Do your best to know the issue before you approach an official and have facts available to support your position. Do your homework and get to the core of the issue when you talk to them. Explain what you want and why, and then, offer to answer any questions they may have.

Be Firm but Friendly

You should never force a commitment on how an official is going to vote. However, once he/she is aware of your position and the issue, it is never too early to begin asking for his/her commitment. Remember to always be courteous and respect time limitations. Do not contact public officials only when you need their help. Make a real effort to keep in touch with them throughout the year - every year.

Attack the Issue, Not the Person Involved

It is not always possible to remain in harmony, but making threats, presenting unfounded allegations, or publicly expressing indignation will get you nowhere. Do not feel that you must be idle when you disagree with an issue. Just be certain to make it understood that you are opposed to the issue, not the people involved with the issue.

Phone Calls

Things can happen very quickly and without notice which creates the need for immediate communication with your legislator. On these occasions, a phone call may be your best way to communicate your position.

Remember these points when phoning an elected official:

- Gather your thoughts before you make the call. Place reference notes in front of you containing information and supporting points.
- Identify yourself by name and as a school board member. Even if you have spoken to the legislator or his/her staff before, their office is contacted by hundreds of people every week, and they may need a refresher.



- Briefly state the reason for your call and state your position.
- Ask your legislator how he/she will vote. If they disagree with you, offer to discuss the issue and supply supporting documentation/materials if needed, but don't argue or become defensive. You will need his/her support on many other issues in the future. Don't burn bridges.
- Thank the legislator and his/her staff for taking the time to speak with you.
- Don't always expect to speak directly with the legislator. Remember that he/she is on a very busy and hectic schedule. If an official is unavailable, state your information to his/her assistant and request that the official return your call at a later time.

Letters

A letter can have a significant impact since it allows you to formulate your thoughts and positions and state a clear rationale on an issue or bill. A major advantage of a letter is that an official can easily access the information and share it with others.

There are a few guidelines you should follow when writing a letter to officials:

- Make sure you spell the person's name correctly and address the letter properly. Use "The Honorable" before the Senator's or Representative's name (The Honorable John Doe). For the salutation, use "Dear Senator or Representative" before the last name (Dear Senator Doe).
- Write in a courteous and personal style and avoid threats or insults.
- Try to avoid form letters. Each legislator should receive an original letter if time permits.
- Make sure your legislator will receive the letter a few days before he/she is scheduled to vote on the issue. Timing is critical.
- If you are writing about a specific bill, identify the appropriate bill number and status. You can find this information on the General Assembly's (www.capitol.tn.gov) website or by calling the TSBA Legislative Department.
- Express your point of view by explaining how the issue would affect your local school district. Legislators appreciate and pay attention to specific impacts on their districts, not potential/hypothetical impacts across the state.
- Get to the point and make sure you ask him/her to take a specific position. Legislators do not have time to read extensive letters. You can attach any supporting materials you feel might be beneficial.
- Make sure your return address is on the letter and ask for a response.



Email

With today's technology, email has the same effect as a letter and provides immediate contact. You should follow the same general guidelines as you would when writing a letter and always remember to include your name and address in the email. If an official or his/her staff members are unsure you are a constituent, your message may not be read. Also, always "cc" the TSBA Director of Government Relations. This person can track the correspondence and ensure the message is reiterated while meeting with legislators in person.

Personal Visits

Of course, the most effective way to influence officials is through face-to-face meetings.

- Make an appointment in advance and be prepared to be concise. Most meetings with legislators last about 15 minutes, and your legislator could be forced to leave on a moment's notice.
- Be courteous to staff, and thank them for the meeting.
- Clearly state your position and describe how the issue will affect his/her constituents.
- State the opposition's side of an argument. Officials appreciate knowing all sides of an issue, and this approach will allow you a chance to provide counter-arguments to your opposition.
- Clearly ask for support and leave written materials to reinforce your position.
- Follow-up the meeting with a thank-you note to the officials and his/her staff.

Be sure to meet with your legislators in your community in addition to Nashville or D.C. In fact, these meetings are often more effective because your legislator is away from the chaos and focused only on you or your group. Schedule a breakfast meeting with your legislators, invite them to your next board meeting, or take them on a tour of your schools. There are several ways you can hold effective and informative meetings in your district, but the important thing is getting your legislator there.

Remember that TSBA's legislative staff is always available to provide you with resources that can assist you in your meeting.



Don't Forget About the Media!

The power of the media can be one of your most effective advocacy tools. Elected officials look to their local media to determine what issues are important to their communities. Write letters to the editor on current issues affecting education and be available for interviews with newspaper, television, and radio reporters. Just be sure to be concise so that your views are reported accurately. Through frequent contact with the media, you can develop solid and professional relationships with education reporters and editors. If your information has been beneficial to their stories, you will find them turning to you for your opinions on education issues.

Remember, no matter what form of communication you use to advocate your positions, you should always be understanding and realistic. Try to understand the situations and constraints that officials face, and keep in mind that controversial issues rarely, if ever, pass without compromise. Also, please keep TSBA's Director of Government Relations abreast of any communication that you have with legislators. It makes his/her job easier to reinforce a point and remind a legislator of your position.



TSBA's Legislative Cycle

January

The legislative session begins, and TSBA secures legislators to sponsor bills.

February

The TSBA Board of Directors meets to take positions on education legislation introduced by the General Assembly. The annual TSBA Legislative and Legal Institute event takes place, bringing together school board members, school officials, and legislators to discuss education issues.

During Legislative Session

During the months of January through May, TSBA's legislative staff monitors education legislation and communicates the positions of the Association to members of the General Assembly. TSBA provides weekly alerts and disseminates Calls to Action to TSBA members.

June-September

Boards submit resolutions and changes or additions to TSBA's position statements to be considered by the TSBA Board of Directors and the Delegate Assembly.

September

The TSBA Board of Directors meets to take action on submitted resolutions and proposed changes to the position statements.

November

The TSBA Board of Directors meets during the TSBA's Annual Convention to take action on any new resolutions or proposed changes to the position statements. Then, the Delegate Assembly meets during the Annual Convention to take final action on the proposed resolutions and position statements which will be used to formulate TSBA's legislative agenda for the upcoming legislative session.

December

TSBA's legislative staff drafts legislation to accomplish the goals of the Association.



A Year of Legislative Advocacy

As school board members, you play a vital role in the legislative process. Legislative advocacy must entail strategic, focused, and ongoing efforts to maximize the impact of your involvement. The following calendar is a template that TSBA encourages all Boards to review, discuss, and adopt. We encourage you to adjust the dates and actions to reflect your Board's schedule and goals and incorporate some or all of the items into your annual agenda.

January & February

- Follow legislation as filed with TSBA's legislative tracker
- Contact TSBA with questions or for assistance
- Watch "State of the State" and examine proposed budget
- Attend TSBA's Legislative and Legal Institute
- Meet with legislators in Nashville
- Distribute materials relevant to filed legislation
- Track legislative actions and votes of your legislators

May

- Host end of session meeting with legislators in the district
- Hold legislators accountable for votes
- Consider joint meetings with other Boards
- Consider joint meetings with funding bodies
- Invite Chambers of Commerce, PTA/PTOs, local education associations, funding bodies, the media, etc.

March & April

- Track legislative actions and votes of your legislators
- Contact legislators to reinforce positions and discuss votes
- Use local networks to generate strength in numbers to influence votes

June & July

- Invite members of funding bodies to tour schools to see successes and needs
- Invite legislators to tour schools to see successes and needs
- In an election year, host candidate forums for contested primary legislative races
- Invite Chambers of Commerce, PTA/PTOs, local education associations, funding bodies, the media, etc.



A Year of Legislative Advocacy

August

- Vote

September & October

- In an election year, host candidate forums for contested general legislative races
- Invite Chambers of Commerce, PTA/PTOs, local education associations, funding bodies, the media, etc.
- Elect a legislative liaison

November & December

- Vote
- Invite newly elected legislators to meet with the Board
- Meet with legislators in the district to discuss priorities prior to session
- Consider joint meetings with other Boards
- Consider joint meetings with funding bodies
- Invite Chambers of Commerce, PTA/PTOs, local education associations, funding bodies, the media, etc.

Year Round (January-December)

- Contact legislators periodically to develop relationships and earn trust
- Stay in touch with local stakeholders to develop relationships and form coalitions

Year round advocacy is needed as we all work together for the students and public schools of Tennessee, and having an established plan is the best way to keep those efforts on track.



Utilizing TSBA's Services

Representation on Capitol Hill

Throughout the legislative session, TSBA's legislative staff monitors legislative activity that affects education and maintains direct communication with legislators, state agencies, and state departments. Meetings are held each week with the Chairpersons of the House and Senate Education Committees to discuss the week's calendars and to provide insight on issues important to Boards. The legislative staff carefully analyzes education legislation and works to ensure that legislation supporting public education becomes law, and harmful legislation is amended or defeated. In addition to meeting with legislators, this process includes testifying at committee meetings, providing position statements to members, and drafting amendments to proposed bills.

Meetings

Each year in February, TSBA hosts the annual Legislative and Legal Institute, one of the most popular and successful legislative events of the year. This annual meeting provides more than 400 school board members and school officials with the information needed to discuss current education legislation and issues.

In addition to the Legislative and Legal Institute, TSBA's legislative staff provides updates and presentations throughout the year at various TSBA meetings, including at both Summer Law Institutes, Fall District Meetings, and the annual TSBA Convention.



Resources

TSBA provides Boards with a number of resources during the legislative session to keep you updated on current legislative activities.

TSBA Legislative Notes is published weekly during the legislative session to inform board members of recent legislative action and to provide information on upcoming committee and floor action. *TSBA Legislative Notes* provides advocacy direction to board members by supplying talking points on bills and issues that board members can use when speaking with their legislators.

After each legislative session, TSBA will provide an overview of the legislative session that contains information on every bill pertaining to education that passed the General Assembly, including a brief bill description. TSBA will also continue to publish a monthly edition of *TSBA Legislative Notes* to encourage board members to continue their advocacy efforts until the next legislative session reconvenes.

Of course, TSBA's Legislative Department is always available to answer questions or provide you with legislative documents or materials. The ultimate goal is for you to have the latest information when you contact your legislators, and if you have questions, there are a number of ways TSBA can provide you with the answers.



TSBA

Tennessee School Boards Association

About TSBA

A statewide non-profit organization, the Tennessee School Boards Association is a federation of all the state's school boards. It serves as an advocate for the interests of Tennessee's public school students and school districts and provides in-service training and technical assistance for more than 950 Board of Education members.

TSBA was founded in 1939, and in 1953, the Tennessee General Assembly officially recognized TSBA as the "organization and representative agency of the members of school boards in Tennessee."



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