

Tips for Speaking with Your Legislator

Your goal is to develop an ongoing personal relationship with your elected representatives, as well as to influence their position on afterschool programming and funding. Here are a few things to keep in mind when speaking with legislators.

- **Know your legislator.** Before making initial contact on an issue, familiarize yourself with the issues your legislator has supported in the past and what's important to them. Do they already have a stance on the issue you are contacting them about?
- **Know your issue.** Provide facts and research to back up your position. Refer to the *Background and Key Messaging* section of this toolkit to help you do this.
- **Practice prior to your meeting.** Roleplay your legislative meeting with a friend or family member to practice what you will say, how you will say it, and how you will respond to questions.
- **Hold a meeting with your legislator at a time of year that is most effective.** If you are advocating for a specific bill or pieces of legislation, aim to meet with them during legislative session (typically early January to mid-May). Note that during legislative session, legislators are the busiest, and that may result in delayed/slow communication. If you are seeking to build a relationship with your legislator and want to inform them about a topic that's important to you in a more relaxed environment, a meeting outside of legislative session will be most impactful.
- **Do not be disappointed if your legislator sends an aide.** Legislators run tight schedules and it isn't uncommon for them to run late to meetings with constituents.
- **Take the time to educate your legislator.** Do not assume that your legislator knows about your work and its impact on students. Do not use fancy jargon.
- **Tell a personal story.** Personal stories can be one of the most impactful ways to make your point. If you are comfortable, you should feel free to share one.
- **Utilize photos and graphics.** Use props like these to tell your story, prove your point, or help your legislator visualize your experiences.
- **Do not be intimidated.** Legislators will view you as the expert on the issue, and their job is to serve your needs as a constituent.
- **Convince your legislator that there is something extra special about your cause.** All causes are good causes and everyone thinks their issue is the most important.
- **Respect the legislator's right to disagree with you.** Don't debate with a legislator or give ultimatums such as "I won't vote for you if you do not support my position."
- **Put broad policy issues in a local perspective.** Legislators who know how issues will impact local voters tend to grasp ideas more easily and are generally more receptive.
- **Be brief, clear, honest, accurate, respectful, persuasive, timely, grateful, and persistent.** Be a good listener. Put the legislator at ease by telling them you're there to serve as a resource, not an adversary. Thank your legislator for taking the time to hear your position.
- **Be aware of when and how you follow up with your legislator.** Once a legislator gives you a commitment, it is appropriate to check back in with them. However, do not badger them with excessive phone calls or emails.