



Starting the Conversation

Steps and strategies to connect with your state representatives

Terrence Falk

For a number of years, state senators and assembly representatives got pelted with questions by school officials at an annual school forum in Medford. It might as well have been the throwing of the rotten tomatoes that were left over from the fall harvest.

“Gotcha questions,” is what Rick Eloranta calls it. Eloranta, an Owen-Withee school board member, saw that some school board members took great delight in backing their elected representatives into a corner. Individual school board members

and administrators would clutch the microphone ripping into long, rambling speeches until someone asked, “What is the question?”

People stopped coming. The Medford forum could draw from over 20 school districts in the area.

“The last year we used the ‘gotcha’ method, we had only one legislator and four candidates, and the other legislators did not come,” says John Gaier, district administrator for Neillsville. From a high of about 150 school officials, the Medford forum now only attracted less than

half that number.

“It made the legislators look bad and it was unsatisfying to the school board members,” says Eloranta. Yet legislators told school officials “We need to hear what your people think ... we need to hear your stories.”

So the Medford forum changed directions. Organizers began sending out questions to legislators in advance so they could come with better researched answers. At each forum, a panel of school officials would give a presentation on a couple of hot topics of the day such



Make Advocacy a Habit

School boards should develop a legislative program to communicate their positions to legislators and others and to stay informed of important issues. A school board should:

- Adopt a board policy that establishes a legislative program. Sample policies are included in the WASB Legislative Advocacy Toolkit.
- Identify a Legislative contact, or a key person or committee, to track legislative issues and communicate the school board's position. Inform the WASB of the name of the key person or committee chair. In addition to the electronic Legislative Updates, he or she will receive additional calls to action and may be contacted for targeted lobbying efforts.
- Identify three to five legislative priorities and a timetable for communicating them to legislators and others. (The WASB legislative priorities are adopted on a biennial basis and are available on the WASB website wasb.org.)
- Discuss at least one legislative issue during each school board meeting.
- Develop and nurture relationships with legislators and key staff members. A sample of a two-year advocacy strategy is included in this toolkit.
- Call on the WASB government relations staff for additional information, sample board resolutions, talking points and letters to the editor.

Taken from the WASB Legislative Advocacy Toolkit. To view the entire toolkit, visit wasb.org. Select "Advocacy & Government Relations" and then "Effective Advocacy Tips."

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they are more likely to treat you with respect
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as Common Core State Standards, vouchers or transportation. Legislators asked questions of the panelists in a real attempt to become better educated on the issues.

And the elected officials and school officials started coming back. At the most recent forum, every state representative except one was there. School officials now number well over a hundred.

And the benefits continue long after the forum is over.

"Administrators are stating that they are fielding more phone calls from legislators where they weren't getting phone calls before," says Eloranta.

■ Establishing Relationships

The Medford forum illustrates what works and what doesn't in working with elected officials.

"Find ways to establish relationships," says Senator Tim Cullen of Janesville.

If legislators get to know you as a person, they are more likely to treat you with respect and listen to your point of view.

Cullen has been on both sides of the microphone, first as a member of the state legislature, then as a school board member, and again returning as a state senator in 2010.

Jack O'Meara, a lobbyist and communication consultant for various educational organizations in Wisconsin, echoes Cullen's recommendation.

"Get to know them," O'Meara said. "Know who they are. Before you even talk to them, do some research ... Look for some common ground," simple things like the same hobbies, restaurants, or places you have visited.

"Develop a relationship before there is a crisis," says O'Meara. You can't be "just complaining how terrible everything is. You also want to highlight the positive." You want them to think of "public schools as a good investment as opposed to a drain on their resources, just one more thing they are spending money on. Think of the stories you want to tell them of why it is a good investment for the state to be supporting your schools."

"Give the legislators something of value that they can use: some statistics or facts about how a piece of legislation might affect schools in their district," says Gaier. "When you are going to talk to a legislator about a certain issue, make sure you have your facts straight. Understand the issue. And what is really



State Rep. Gary Hebl (D-Sun Prairie) meets with Susan Fox and Susan Manning of the Monona Grove School Board.

important is to tell your district's story. Know what the impact might be on your district."

"When you meet with legislators, you don't have to talk about politics; talk about education," says Cullen.

After being elected in 2010, the Beloit school district administrator asked Cullen to come down in

December to brief him on what was going on in their district.

"That was extremely helpful... They didn't ask me to do anything." But from then on, Senator Cullen states that the people in Beloit are some of the first people he now asks when it comes to educational issues.

■ Contacting Legislators

School board members might think that the best time to contact their elected officials is right before an

election. After all, politicians are trying to get every vote, and they may be willing to make promises to you that they might not be willing to make at a different time of year. But Senator Cullen believes that this may be the worst time to push your agenda. After all, no bills are going to be passed during an election cycle. Instead contact your representative right after the elections, in late November or December. This is often a honeymoon period where

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temper settle down and serious work begins. Elected officials are far more willing to talk about true educational policy and even reach across to members of the other party in order to get things done.

“It is important to understand that legislators face a variety of challenges whether it’s on health-care, education, or taxes,” says O’Meara. “They are hearing from a lot of different people every day on many issues ... Legislators are pulled in a lot of different directions.”

“We are generalists,” says Senator Cullen. “If you bring up any topic that you could possibly consider, each of us knows five minutes about it ... We know 30 minutes on a few subjects.” Legislators usually have deep knowledge on only a couple of subjects. That means legislators often must rely on others to give them that knowledge base.

Cullen relies on other senators he trusts on some key issues or a friend he has back in his district who has a good handle on particular subjects. Other legislators rely heavily on their staff members. Don’t be insulted when you are asked to meet with a staff member rather than the elected official. Staff members are usually highly prized and trusted, and their opinions matter.

■ Getting Your Voice Heard

School board members may feel that they have an elected official that is so set in his or her ways, so ideological, that no amount of contact is going to make any difference. But you have to keep trying, says O’Meara. “Even if you think it is falling on deaf ears,

because you never know when your contacts have an impact.”

“Boards make a mistake in not having meetings” with their elected officials, says Cullen. Without those meetings, you are not getting your legislators on the record on how they feel. “It may not be what the board wants to hear at all.” But without those meetings, “You are really giving them a pass.”

Gaier tries to contact his legislators at least every other month. Find out how they wish to be contacted: email, phone calls, or face-to-face.

“You’re not going to win every battle,” says Gaier. But school board members might be winning far more than they realize. “We don’t do a good job of keeping track of those things that never come to a vote.” Because some school officials get involved early on in the legislative process, many bills that would have

been detrimental to public education never made it to the legislative floor.

“Talk to legislators back in your district, not just coming up to the capitol,” says Cullen. “Get to them early, long before anything has been proposed.”

School board members may not realize just how powerful they can be, says Cullen.

“A school board member has a microphone in a local community,” Cullen said. “They can speak out, and the press will report it. You don’t come with campaign contributions, but you do come with a microphone.”

In the end, legislators know that they should be listening to you. ■

Terry Falk is a member of the Milwaukee Board of School Directors and a member of the WASB Board of Directors. He is the WASB liaison to WSPRA. For more information about WSPRA, visit wspira.org.

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