



A Parent's Guide to Local Advocacy

As a parent or caregiver, you are your child's best advocate — and collectively with others, you can have a strong influence on local education decisions. As COVID-19 continues to bring new challenges, it's important for parents and caregivers to advocate for quality education and ensure that students with disabilities are served well. Use these tips to have your voice heard in many settings on any education issues you care about.

3 Ways to Advocate Locally

1

Meet with...

- Your district superintendent or special education director
- Your school board
- Your school principal

2

Send a letter to...

- Your district superintendent or special education director
- Your school board
- Your mayor or governor
- Officials at your state education agency or state legislature

3

Share your views by...

- Asking a question at a local town hall or campaign event
- Writing an op-ed in your local newspaper

Know the issue and your "ask."

Many issues are worth advocating for. For each meeting you attend or letter you send, you'll want to pick one or two of the issues most important to you. Be sure you have a specific solution you're seeking in response. Make sure your "ask" is very clear. Be sure the decision makers will know exactly what you'd like them to do. Are you asking for a change to your school's policies? Are you asking for more funding to be spent on a particular issue? Whatever it is, make sure you know how the issue can be solved. Then, research the opposition. Who might be opposed to your solution? Why? Be sure you have some counterarguments to opposing positions. Being fully prepared for any questions or pushback on your solution is an important first step in your advocacy efforts.



Shape your story.

Advocacy can be most effective when it centers around a personal experience. Our education system is made up of millions of children who are impacted every day by their experiences in schools. Your child is one of them, and you've had unique experiences on your journey. Reflect on these experiences. Which challenges have you and your child overcome? What made the biggest impact on your child's school experience? What else is needed to help your child succeed? Your experiences may be unique to you and your family, but others in your community likely have had similar experiences. Choosing a few examples can help make your "ask" more personal and help the decision makers relate to the issue.

Decide who the right decision maker is.

There are many decision makers within the public education system. Some work in school buildings, some work at the district level, and others work for the state education agency. Each plays an important role, and many of them collaborate regularly. However, only certain ones may be able to take the action you're seeking. Ask yourself: "Which decision maker can actually accomplish this?" Focus your advocacy efforts on that person or office. For example, your school principal may not be able to make funding decisions, but they can encourage teachers in your school building to adopt certain practices. On the other hand, your school board can approve budgets, set priorities, and make decisions about school calendars, policies, and resources, but they may not be best suited to handle school-specific issues like instruction or school climate.

Look for others to join you.

There is strength in numbers. The collective voice of parents can be powerful. Seek out parents who are facing similar challenges, and have them join you in speaking up on a certain issue. Be sure to use digital resources such as social media and email Listservs to build connections and find other interested parents. Here are some organizations that could help you connect with supportive parents:

- Your district's special education parent committee, often called Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC), Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee (SECAC), or Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA)
- Local disability support groups such as your state's Decoding Dyslexia chapter or your local Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD) affiliate
- Parent organizations like your school's PTA or PTO and neighborhood or cultural groups

If you're sending a letter...

Make it local.

Most decision makers want to know how the issue is impacting their local community. Begin by explaining who you are and where you live. Being a parent with a child in a particular school district or town might be relevant to the decision maker and the area of your state they're most concerned with.

Clearly state what you're asking for.

If you're looking for a "yes" or "no" vote on a particular proposal, say that up front. If you're looking for a specific amount of funding for a new initiative, state it. Make it easy for them to understand what you'd like them to do.

If you're requesting a meeting...

Learn about the decision maker you're meeting with.

Know their role, any committees they're part of, or decisions they've made on similar issues in the past.

Prepare your remarks.

Identify a few key messages that you'd like to get across and some data points or statistics to support your claims. Be sure you also have a solution you can propose to address the issues you're raising. Some meetings or events may have a time limit for each public commenter. Make the most of the time you have by having prepared, concise, fact-based remarks. Practice your remarks beforehand with a timer.

If you're speaking publicly at a meeting or event...

Find out how the event will run.

Typical meeting schedules may be interrupted due to COVID-19, and meetings or events might be happening virtually. There may be a limit to the number of people who can attend. Find out as much as you can about the event and how much time is available for advocates to speak.



For more information on ways to get involved, check out [NCLD's COVID-19 Parent Advocacy Toolkit](#). This toolkit can help you advocate for students with learning and attention issues during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Using these recommendations, you can encourage decision makers in your state and school district to use funding and resources in ways that will address the needs of students with disabilities.



For more information, visit www.nclld.org or contact NCLD via email: info@nclld.org
P.O. Box 34056, Washington, DC 20043
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