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TIPS TO COMMUNICATE WITH FEDERAL AND STATE LEGISLATORS

- **Do**
identify clearly the subject matter or subjects in which you are interested, not just House or Senate bill numbers. Remember, it is easy to get a bill number incorrect.
- **Do**
state why you are concerned about an issue or issues. Your own personal experience is excellent evidence. Explain how you think an issue will affect your business, profession, community, or family.
- **Do**
restrict yourself to one or at most two topics. Concentrate your arguments.
- **Do**
put your thoughts in your own words. This is especially important if you are responding to something you read.
- **Do**
try to establish a relationship with your own legislators. In general, you have more influence as a actual constituent.
- **Do**
communicate while legislation is in committee and subcommittees, as well as when it is on the floor. Legislators
- **Don't**
be starstruck. Yes, be in awe of our system of democracy in which you're participating in and yes, respect the legislative office... but resist the temptation to be "wowed" by a legislator. Remember, they are your neighbors.
- **Don't**
ever, ever threaten. Don't even hint "I'll never vote for you unless you do what I want." Present the best arguments in favor of your position and ask for their consideration. You needn't remind a legislator of electoral consequences. Visits, phone calls, and mail will be counted without your prompting.
- **Don't**
pretend to wield vast political influence. Communicate with legislator's as a constituent, not as a self-appointed spokesperson for your school, neighborhood, community, or profession.

However, if you really are a spokesperson for a group be sure to mention it.
- **Don't**
use incendiary rhetoric, innuendos or

have much more influence over legislation with their committee's and subcommittees's jurisdiction.

cliches. Such jargon can make your communications sound mass produced even when they aren't.

- **Don't** become a pen pal or perpetual informercial. Some legislative offices will become indifferent to you.

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Phoning Congress and State Legislators

Normally the best time to telephone members of Congress or state legislators is when you want then to take immediate action, as on an upcoming vote, and there isn't enough time for a letter or a visit. **Here are some tips on what to say on the phone.**

- Phone calls should be concise—don't expect to get into an in-depth discussion. Talk about only one issue per call. Often, when a vote is imminent, all that's necessary is to mention the number and/or name of the bill and how you want the Congressperson or legislator to act. A couple of stinging points to support your position should be included.
- If your calling a member of Congress or legislator with a large staff, ask to speak to the assistant who handles your particular issue. Make sure you get the name of the person with whom you are speaking. Take notes, document the entire conversation (don't tape).
- Identify yourself, hometown, and phone number. That way the legislator knows you're a constituent, and will be able to get back to you with more information. If you want to be identified as being from a particular organization, make sure you state that as well.
- At the end of the call, be sure to ask for a commitment to a course of action. Sometimes, the Congressperson/legislator or staff member will not be able to give you an immediate yes or no answer. In that case, ask when you can expect an answer.
- **Here's an sample phone conversation:**

<i>"Congresswoman Swayable's office."</i>	"Hello. May I speak to the legislative assistant who deals with education issues?"
<i>"Just one moment..."</i>	
<i>"This is Gary Greeter."</i>	"Hello. My name is Archie Advocate. I live in Anytown, in Congresswoman Swayable's district."
<i>"How may I help you?"</i>	"I'd like the Congresswoman to support the Equal Access to Education Act, HR 3456. Specifically, the provision including the fair sharing of curriculum resources to all children, regardless of where they go to school. Any exclusion of Catholic school children from such benefits would stand in the school house doorway barring equal access to education."
<i>"All right I'll let her know you feel."</i>	"Has she indicated how she will vote?"
<i>"She has no position at this time."</i>	"O.K. could you please get back to me with her stand either for or against? My number is..."

- If you'd like, follow-up your phone call with a short note to the elected official or staff member with whom you spoke, emphasizing your position and your appreciation of his/her attention to the issue. This can help build an ongoing relationship.
- Remember always to be cordial with legislators and their staff. Though they may not share your position on a particular issue, when you contact them you're building a relationship which may be fruitful in the future.

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WRITING OR E-MAILING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS AND STATE LEGISLATORS

Letters are among the oldest and most popular vehicle of communication with legislators. Members of Congress and state legislators do pay attention to their daily mail (or e-mail). Many have staffers just waiting to answer your mail and register your opinion. Legislative staffers maintain that **one letter from an individual is viewed as representing the concerns of ten other constituents!**

Thoughtful letters, presenting clear and forceful arguments carry the most weight, and are the ones most often passed along from the staff to your federal/state legislators. But remember, any letter, even a postcard, is better than no letter at all.

Tips

Do your Homework

Know the pros and cons of your issue and the courses of action that have been proposed. Know where your legislators stand on the issue. Show a familiarity with the legislator's past action on related issues. An hour in the public library looking up your issue in recent newspapers will pay off. If your letter is about a specific bill, cite it by name (and number) if you can.

Take a stand, Make it Personal

In the first paragraph, state why the issue concerns you and what you think should be done about it. Share from your own knowledge and experience. Explain how the issue will personally affect you, your family, friends, business and community. Provide concrete real life stories and analogies which a legislator can relate to.

Be an Inch Wide, a Mile Deep

Cover only one issue in a one page letter. Present your case with a convincing rationale that your legislator can incorporate into their own argument. Build your case point by point, appealing to reason. Speak in the language of policy. Send enclosures if you think more information is needed. Relevant editorials and news stories from local newspapers in your legislator's district will get her/his attention.

Praise is as Important as Criticism

When legislators take a brave stand, get in touch to express your thanks. Legislators need to know we're backing them up when they do the right thing. When you disagree with your legislator, do it politely, and try to find something praiseworthy about him or her. It's best, if your first written contact with your legislator is a pat on the back. Then, they'll be more likely to listen when you write with constructive criticism.

Ask for a Commitment to a Specific Action

Let your legislator know exactly what you want done. Ask a legislator to reply, and ask very directly whether she or he will support your position. Legislators are masters of non-replies (letters which avoid giving a position). When you receive a response from your legislator, check to see if they have responded to what you asked, if not, write again. Provide copies of any replies you receive to your leadership and lobbyists.

Show them how they can Take Credit

All politicians are in the credit-taking business. They'll be much more inclined to do what you want if you can convince them that it will put them in a favorable light before a large number of people. Enlist others to sign your letter. Provide legislators with new catch phrases and quotables which will report well in the newspapers. Frame your issue in such a way as to reinforce your legislator's campaign promises.

Don't Miss the Boat

Be certain that your legislator receives the letter before the vote. Allow enough time for the "snail mail" to get to your legislator's office. Then allow a day for it to sit in the mailbox. Then allow another day for your letter to be opened, registered, and forwarded. On the fourth day, after arriving at the capitol, your letter should be receiving your legislator's attention (either personally or as part of a constituency total).

Show Good Form

Put it in your own words, avoid buzz words or jargon, and use only those acronyms that the legislator will know. Avoid "Canned" letters. Although any letter is better than no letter. A personal letter, in your own words, is immeasurably better. Write on plain stationery or on your personal or business letterhead. Handwritten letters are fine as long as they are legible. They often get more attention than typed letters.

Define your Relationship

Always write as a constituent. Decide whether you should be writing as an individual or as a member of a group. If you are writing as a group, it will broaden your base of influence. If your writing as an organization, use your group's letterhead. If you know your legislator, make it clear in the first paragraph. This will alert the person opening the mail to give the letter special attention. By all means use your legislator's first name if you have established that kind of relationship.

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Visiting Members of Congress & State Legislators

A face-to-face meeting with an elected representative, or a key member of their staff, is the best way to lobby your views. Individuals or small delegations taking time to make a personal visit provide legislators with solid, real life evidence of the importance of a particular issue to their constituencies. Moreover, rationale discussions on pending legislation with legislators can educate and, ideally, influence their position.

Don't feel you are imposing: after all, legislators meet with constituents daily. If you feel intimidated at first, remember that legislators depend on you for support just as you depend on them. What follows are a few steps to help ensure a successful meeting.

Step 1: Arranging the Visit

- No Cold Calls Please! Visits can be scheduled through the appointment/calendar secretary either at the local district office or the legislator's capitol office, depending on whether they are in session. It is best set up the meet two to three weeks in advance. Unless you have an unusual problem, don't ask for more than half an hour of time. You will probably get 10 to 15 minutes.
- Clarify the purpose for the visit: *Get Acquainted? Express Views? Seek Action?* Identify who will be attending. You'll increase your chances of meeting face-to-face with the member by having a group meeting of constituents who represent different experiences and backgrounds. This broadens your base and influence.
- Depending on legislative developments, it may be necessary to meet with staff rather than the legislator. Since legislators rely heavily on their professional staff's opinion, this is also a very important meeting. Staff members are vital gatekeepers; they must be cultivated. They can provide you with access and, if they are sympathetic with your position, can become a trusted voice in the ear of the legislator. If your legislator decides to adopt one of your causes, it is the staff who will do much of the work.

- Confirm the visit by letter soon after arranging the appointment, and then again by phone the previous day.

Step 2: Preparing for the Visit

- Develop a succinct agenda. If you're going as a group, agree on your goal and message before hand. Show a united front; divisiveness is both irritating and confusing. In advance, agree on one facilitator/spokesperson.
- ABOVE ALL DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Have well-reasoned facts and figures on your issue(s) ready, but do not be overwhelming. Be ready to answer questions and (when necessary) respond to counter-arguments made by your opponents.
- Additionally, be sure all participants in the meeting are politically astute. Know the extent of the legislator's district, committee assignments, number of terms served. Know the legislator's voting record, and/or position, on the issue(s). Know the lawmaking process and what legislative actions are required.
- Prepare a "leave-behind" information packet for the legislator: fact sheets and stories about your own Catholic school community, bundles of constituent letters, and any briefing materials deemed appropriate. A specific request for action should also be included. This action request might be a two or three paragraph statement articulating the legislative action requested, and why that action should be taken.
- If possible, have high profile supporters send strong letters expressing their point of view before your meeting takes place. "Dear Colleague" letters, written by elected officials and directed to their fellow legislators, are also effective and should be sent prior to your meeting or at least be included in your information packet.

Step 3: During the Visit (Arrive on time, even a little early).

- When visiting your legislator, assemble a delegation which represents a broad base of her/his constituency. It's always good to have an "odd-couple" -- a person representing a group that is not usually affiliated with another organization represented. (i.e. A public school teacher who is also a Catholic school parent teamed-up with a Catholic school teacher who is also a public school parent).
- When visiting be on time, positive, friendly. Know your agenda and stick to your message. Don't assume the legislator is

familiar with the details of the issue/bill. Take notes during the visit which will provide a written summary. Be alert to staff members assigned to work in this area.

- Make your presentation simple and straightforward; you may have only 5 or 10 minutes left by the time you get through with introductions and pleasantries. When visiting your legislator, prepare two sets of remarks: One that is 15 minutes, the other that is 90 seconds long. That way you will be prepared if she/he is called out of the office in the middle of your visit.
- Because it was you who arranged the visit, legislators will expect that you start the discussion. One format for discussion follows a simple outline:

I. Create an Open Climate.

Begin the visit by introducing yourselves and thanking the legislator for meeting with you as well as for some favorable position they have already taken (if there is one).

II. Present your Message.

- a. OPEN the discussion by framing the issue on your terms; EXPLORE the issue by taking a position and identifying any relevant legislation;
- b. SUPPORT your position by explaining why such a measure is good public policy;
- c. APPLY the policy to real lives by making clear how the legislation affects people in the legislators district. Anecdotal evidence of how you will be personally affected can also be very moving. A few, memorable statistics can further emphasize your point. When possible show that the issue affects the legislator's committee assignments. Also, be sure to cite any significant support within the district.

III. Make a Specific Request for Legislative Action.

Then, let them know what action you are requesting. A specific request for legislative action will allow you to control the meeting. You have now set the agenda. If attempts are made to divert discussion, simply, and politely, return to your issue. Finally, if the legislator seems supportive, seek a commitment. If the legislator remains opposed, ask her or him to keep an open mind and remain neutral.

- Be responsive to your legislators questions. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't fake it or bluff. Say "I don't know, but I'll get back to you on it." Then DO IT.

- Don't overstay your welcome. Conclude the visit by again extending the appropriate thank you. Reaffirm your intention to forward any information or materials which was requested by the legislator.

Step 4: Following the Visit (Always debrief as a group immediately afterwards).

- Personal visits always increase a legislator's awareness of an issue. However, the effectiveness of such a visit increases markedly when accompanied by follow-up actions.
- Send a thank-you note or letter which reinforces your message and the local impact, restates an understanding of the legislator's position, highlights the main points of the visit, and concludes with a personal story which surfaced during the conversation. It should also provide the member with any additional materials or information s/he may have requested
- Send a copy to other members of the group and those who are directly lobbying on your behalf. If the visit was held with a staff member, still address the letter to the legislator with a copy (cc) to the staff member.

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