2013 PPI Capitol Hill Visits
Legislative Talking Points

In preparation for the Capitol Hill Day

1. Review the actual bill text for the following bills and determine if your elected officials have signed on as sponsors. The links below provide you with the text of the legislation. To view the co-sponsors of the legislation, click the link “Bill Summary and Status” at the top of the page. Then click the link “Co-Sponsors.” Information about every piece of legislation being considered by Congress is available at the Library of Congress: http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php.

SENATE:
S. 403 Safe Schools Improvement Act
S. 648 Helping Educators Support All Students Act
S. 689 Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act of 2013
S. 1094 Strengthening America’s Schools Act

HOUSE:
HR 320 Student Support Act
HR 1199 Safe Schools Improvement Act
HR 1854 Partnerships for Achieving Student Success
HR 1875 Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2013

2. For each bill, see if your Senator/Representatives has signed on.
   • IF your elected official is a sponsor, THANK them for their support of this bill when it comes up in conversation.
   • IF your elected official is NOT a sponsor, ask them if they would be willing to review and consider cosponsoring the bill.

3. If your elected official is a member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce or the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pension you can also ask them to request a hearing on a particular issue.

4. Don’t worry about the fine details in a bill. There are only two big things you should take away from each bill: 1) How does the bill propose to address a specific issue? Just the basics. 2) How much is it expected to cost? (This is the program authorization request and it should be stated in the bill if there is a “price tag” attached.)

5. Most of the time your conversations will be more about broad issues, not specific legislation and you will never need to know these details. However, if you review this information and someone asks you something—you will have the information at your finger tips.

Setting the Stage for Advocacy: The Basics

- Thank the legislative assistant/Congressman/Senator for taking the time to visit with you.
- Introduce yourself and each person in your group and provide a brief statement about your background working in schools or your interest in education.
- Be sure and have the constituents in your group clearly identify themselves.
- Ask the elected official/staffer if he or she knows any school psychologists or other school employed mental health professionals (e.g. school counselors and school social workers). Offer some basic information for them about the role of school psychologists and the importance of our work in supporting student behavior and learning. Feel free to share anecdotal comments throughout the meeting.
- Focus on the broad role of a school psychologist including, prevention, intervention, and consultation services with school staff and families. There is information in their packet that explains what a school psychologist does and how we coordinate with others to provide comprehensive learning supports that help students achieve their best.
- Emphasize the need for all school-employed mental health professionals in schools: school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses. The needs of students and families are best met when we work collaboratively together. It is also important to emphasize the importance of families having access to more intensive community based therapeutic interventions (before and after school) that are fully coordinated with school employed personnel.
- If a staff person asks you a question you don’t know the answer to, do not worry about it. It happens all of the time. Simply reply that you are “not sure, but you can find out” and ask if it is OK to get back to them. After your meeting, talk to one of the organizers of the Public Policy Institute and we’ll tell you how to follow up and direct you to any additional resources that might be of assistance. You will need to have the follow up conversation.
Key Talking Points:

1) INTRODUCTION OF THE PROBLEM:

We are here to ask for your help in creating policies that support student behavior and promote learning, including safe and supportive learning environments. School environments that are safe, prevent negative behaviors, foster increased student engagement, support students’ social-emotional wellness and mental health, and encourage positive behavior are necessary to help students achieve to their fullest potential. Unfortunately, student learning and mental health supports are given marginal attention and too often, students struggle in meeting their academic potential, or fail to complete school due to the lack of adequate learning supports to help them overcome barriers to learning. We are especially interested in promoting policies that help all students achieve better outcomes in school. The areas where we would like to see improvements made to public policies, and specifically the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, include:

- **Promote School Environments that are Conducive to Learning and Responsible Behavior**: Supportive school environments that promote school connectedness, prevent negative behaviors, and proactively teach and reinforce positive behaviors and social skills.

- **Effective School-wide Discipline Policies and Practices**: Schools must have discipline policies and practices that are positive, fair, consistently implemented, and are designed to keep students in the classroom. We need to move away from the implementation of ineffective zero tolerance policies and unnecessary suspensions and expulsions.

- **Provide Sufficient Access to Learning and Mental Health Services and Supports**: Learning supports are essential to student success. Comprehensive and coordinated learning supports directly contribute to more positive student outcomes and increased academic achievement. Policies, as well as funding, that improve student access to specialized instructional support personnel who provide and coordinate learning, health, and mental health services and supports can help ensure that all students needs are identified and met.

- **Promote safe school environments for all students that are free of bullying and harassment**. Positive school climate correlates with high student achievement and student engagement, and often includes school safety, positive behavioral supports, bullying prevention, extracurricular programming, and crisis prevention and response. Policies need to promote the practice of tracking variables that reflect a school’s climate and intentionally implementing programs and supports that promote positive school climates for student success.

A. **Promote School Environments that are Conducive to Learning and Responsible Behavior**: School-wide programs that prevent negative behaviors and increase school safety are central to creating safe and supportive conditions for learning.

**Key Policy Objectives:**

1) Encourage school districts to implement school wide programs, problem-solving processes, and prevention and intervention services embedded in multi-tiered systems of support (i.e. response to intervention and positive behavior interventions and support.)

2) Encourage policies that provide funds to train teachers and school staff in classroom instruction and school-wide initiatives that enable students to acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills conducive to social and emotional competency.

3) Encourage states and school districts to routinely measure conditions for learning by surveying students and staff and incorporating those results into comprehensive school improvement plans.

B. **Effective School-wide Discipline Policies and Practices**. To stop the school to prison pipeline and keep youth in school, ineffective and harmful zero tolerance policies need to be replaced with positive discipline practices.

**Key Policy Objectives:**

1) Prohibit the use of zero tolerance policies except in cases that directly violate the Gun Free Schools Act.

2) Increase the implementation of initiatives such as positive behavioral supports and/or restorative justice to keep students in school out of jail.

3) Increase collaboration between the school, law enforcement, juvenile justice, and social services.

C. **Provide Sufficient Access to Learning and Mental Health Services and Supports**. ESEA needs to explicitly promote policies and funding that improve student access to specialized instructional support personnel who can provide the learning and mental health services, supports, and leadership to ensure that student needs are identified and responded to.

**Key Policy Objectives:**

1) Provide sufficient student support services and access to qualified school and community personnel to meet the needs of students and to promote healthy learning and development by coordinating services across a continuum of care that integrates schools, families, and community providers. Include rates and effectiveness of home-school-community collaboration as part of school accountability measures.

2) Encourage policies that establish programs fostering supportive relationships between students in transition and caring adults (e.g., mentoring, educational liaisons, educational advocates, specific program coordinators).
3) Provide federal leadership for addressing barriers to learning and advancing specialized instructional and student support services.

C. Promote safe school environments for all students that are free of bullying and harassment. Policies need to promote the practice of tracking variables that reflect a school’s climate and intentional implementation of evidenced based programs and supports that ensure that all students feel safe and supported in school.

**Key Policy Objectives:**

1) Ensure that instruction, assessment, and interventions are responsive to students’ individual backgrounds and circumstances, including culture and language.

2) Encourage policies that require schools to specifically prohibit bullying and harassment, including conduct based on a student’s actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or religion.

3) Encourage policies that help schools and school districts implement evidence based school wide bullying prevention programs, including professional development on how to identify and respond to incidents of bullying.

2) EXPLAINING THE PROBLEM WITH RESEARCH SUPPORTS

Safe and supportive learning environments are essential to school success and are associated with more positive academic and social outcomes for students.

**Safe and supportive conditions for learning are essential to school success.**

- Changing a school’s climate and connectedness for the better is associated with significant increases in reading, writing, and math, regardless of whether a school starts with high or low school climate and connectedness or high or low achievement scores (Spier et al., 2007; Spier et al., 2007).

- Interventions that strengthen students’ social, emotional, and decision-making skills also positively impact their academic achievement both in terms of higher standardized test scores and better grades (Fleming et al., 2005).

- Interventions that promote students’ bonding to school contribute to positive outcomes in terms of academic performance and social competence, while reducing tobacco, alcohol, and drug use; criminal involvement; gang membership; and school dropout (Catalano et al., 2004).

**School-wide programs that prevent negative behaviors increase school safety and are central to positive conditions for learning.**

- Witnessing or experiencing school violence diminishes student well-being and motivation, and leads to increased risk of aggression, school avoidance, and dislike of school. Truancy and decreased school engagement resulting from school violence are largely attributed to students feeling unsafe (Janosz et al., 2008).

- In 2011, 5.9% of high school students reported that they missed at least one day of school in the previous month because they felt unsafe at or on their way to and from school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

- Whole school interventions using positive behavior support have been shown to decrease behavior problems while improving academic performance, as measured by standardized tests in reading and math (Luisilli et al., 2005).

**Bullying prevention policies and integrated prevention programs are necessary for student success.**

- 70-80% of school-aged students have been involved in bullying at some point during their school years (Graham, 2011).

- Frequent exposure to victimization or bullying others is associated with high risks of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts; even infrequent involvement in bullying behavior is related to increased risk of depression and suicidality, particularly among girls (Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007).

- School-wide interventions are more likely to positively impact school climate and reduce bullying than individualized or classroom interventions implemented in isolation (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

**Zero Tolerance Policies, Suspensions, and Expulsions lead to decreased achievement and increased risk for harmful behaviors.**

- Zero tolerance policies strengthen the link between schools and prisons, and they negatively impact a disproportionately large number of minority students (Casella, 2003; APA, 2004).

- Empirical evidence has not shown zero tolerance policies to be effective in reducing violence or promoting learning. In fact, they can inhibit academic achievement and increase problem behaviors and dropout rates among middle and secondary school students (Skiba, 2004; APA 2008).

- Suspension and expulsion are often administered unfairly and they increase the likelihood of students’ poor academic performance and dropping out of school, while having no measurable deterrent effect or academic benefit. Even worse, there is a direct link between suspension and expulsion and the likelihood of being sentenced to prison (Mendez, 2003; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Maag, 2012).

Having adequate access to adults who can help them resolve problems before they become a barrier to student success (access to school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, etc.). There is a national shortage of school mental health positions and personnel (school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers). These are the professionals that work to provide comprehensive learning and mental health supports for students, often lead positive behavior intervention and support programs, social emotional learning programs, and school violence reduction programs.
The impact of promotion and prevention interventions is at least two to three times higher when programs are carefully implemented by qualified personnel who have expert knowledge of the relevant issues being addressed (Durlak & Dupre, 2008).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that services provided by school psychologists can have a significant, positive impact on students’ academic achievement (Goodman & Young, 2006).

School counseling practices have been shown to improve students’ social skills, and school social work services have been shown to be cost-effective in reducing problem behaviors and school exclusion (Whiston & Sexton, 1998; Bagley & Pritchard, 1998).

WHAT TO DO TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM: OUR KEY MESSAGES:

- **Ask for their support S1094 Strengthening America’s Schools Act.**
  This bill was recently voted out of the Senate HELP committee and is intended to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This bill addresses all of NASP’s legislative priorities and focuses on the importance providing learning supports to all students. In addition, there are specific individual pieces of legislation that address more narrow policy priorities.

- **Ask for their support of legislation that promotes safe and supportive learning environments and provides federal grant money to develop the capacity of schools to provide learning supports (including school mental health supports, specialized instructional support services, etc.) for students.**

  **SENATE**
  S. 648 Helping Educators Support All Students
  S. 689 Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act of 2013

  **HOUSE**
  HR 751 Mental Health in the Schools Act
  HR 1875 Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011

- **Ask for their support of legislation that requires states develop anti-bullying policies, provide professional developing in identifying and responding to bullying, and to keep track of the number of bullying and harassment incidents so that schools can gain a better awareness of the scope of the problem and the need for proactive policies and interventions:**

  **SENATE**
  HR 1199 Safe Schools Improvement Act

  **HOUSE**
  S 403 Safe Schools Improvement Act

- **Ask for their support of legislation that promotes the use of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports in schools.** The primary bills of interest here are:

  **SENATE**
  S 689 Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act of 2013

- **Ask for their support of legislation that helps make school-employed mental health professionals more accessible to children in need.**

  **SENATE**
  S1094 Strengthening America’s Schools Act

  **HOUSE**
  HR 320 Student Support Act
  HR 1854 Partnerships for Achieving Student Success Act

**CLOSING:**
1. Ask if the legislative assistant/elected official has any questions.
2. Ask what their general perception of these proposals and requests are and if they think that their boss can support these issues.
3. Offer to provide future input if needed. (Follow up as requested.)
4. Thank them for their time and attention to your issues.