

Tips for Becoming an Effective Advocate: How to Educate Lawmakers

1. Identify your elected officials. Use the NASP Advocacy Action Center (<http://cqrengage.com/naspweb/home>) to identify your elected representatives at the state and federal level. Review facts about them including which counties he/she represents, committee assignments, personal history, awards, involvement in education, school safety, and mental health. It may also be helpful to identify their legislative aides whose role includes education and/or mental health issues. For example, your lawmaker's website may include the contact information for a designated staff member responsible for education and mental health related issues. You may also call their local office to request the appropriate contact person for specific issues.

2. Contact your elected officials. Constituents can contact their elected officials through various methods (i.e. phone, mail, e-mail, in person) to set up a meeting. If you find it challenging to get a response for a meeting request from your elected official's office, you may find it more convenient to call them directly. As a voting constituent, you are vital to your elected official's success in office and in any future elections. If you continue to find it difficult to reach their office, be sure to remember this before the next election; it is their job to listen to your concerns. Utilize the NASP Advocacy Action Center to send your legislators messages through e-mail to let them know that their support is needed to ensure that students in your school district, county, and/or state have access to a safe school climate and comprehensive school-employed mental health services. Offer to be a local resource if the legislator has questions about the link between student achievement, school safety, and positive school climate. Legislators are especially interested in their constituent's knowledge and like to know professionals they can call upon to discuss specific issues.

3. Meet with your legislators at their local offices. Join forces with other school-employed mental health service professionals (e.g., school counselors, school social workers) to visit your elected officials in their local congressional district. Due to the busy schedule of many legislators, it is not uncommon for in-person meetings to be conducted with members of their staff including legislative assistants, legislative directors, or interns. These meetings are equally as important as legislators rely on these staff members to help them make important public policy decisions. While meeting the legislator or staff member, it is important to build rapport. Attempt to make a personal connection with them (e.g., Were they previously educators? Did you grow up in the same area?) Find out what issues your legislator/policy maker is concerned about, offer help when appropriate, and connect your issue of safe schools to what concerns them.

- **When making personal visits, provide a written summary of research, data, and other information.** Consider including NASP fact sheets, position statements, and recommendations.

- **Ask if they would be willing to support a specific proposal, vote yes (or no) for a certain bill or amendment, or champion a specific issue.** Offer to be a local resource person if the legislator has questions about education or school-employed mental health issues. Legislators like to know professionals they can call on to discuss specific issues.
- **If the legislator or staff member says something you disagree with, practice good active listening skills, and politely offer facts (if you have them) to rebut the statement. A polite, positive approach is always best.** After you leave, you may think of a point or find relevant information to support your argument. This gives you a perfect opportunity to follow up with the legislator and restate your point. The more they hear from you (without being annoying), the more you will make the issues known and they will consider you a resource. Sometimes it takes years to correct faulty information or beliefs... be patient, polite, positive and persistent.
- **Use their names and keep in touch throughout the legislative session to remind them of your issues and ask about progress on specific bills addressing school-employed mental health services.** Leave materials summarizing your purpose for the visit and your contact information (e.g., business card). Be sure to send a follow-up “thank you” email or card, as well. In your “thank you”, include a brief summary of your visit. Assure the legislator that you will stay in touch and then periodically follow up with the legislator regarding any specific bills that address comprehensive school psychological services.
- **4. Reach out to your state school psychology association members.** To encourage others to join in advocating for safe and successful schools, spread your advocacy news with your state association members. You may want to investigate to see if your state association has a designated point of contact for legislative priorities. If you do, be sure to reach out to this person so that you can effectively collaborate before speaking to policy makers.

5. Organize a briefing with local or state decision makers. With assistance from other key school-employed mental health providers, coordinate a briefing regarding ways to implement and sustain comprehensive school psychological services.

6. Coordinate a “call-in day” regarding specific legislation. It can be very effective to flood the phones of an elected official by organizing a “call in day” where you and your colleagues call an elected official about the same issue. Prepare a brief outline of “talking points” (see suggestions below) for all participants and target specific legislators for multiple calls.

- Rehearse a brief statement summarizing your purpose for contacting the elected official. For example, “I am a school psychologist in your district and I would like to discuss the benefits of effective school safety practices, positive school climate, and school-employed mental health services.” Make a brief outline of the points you wish to convey. Be concise and present your points in order of importance. Be prepared to relate at least one quick real-life example illustrating how access to school-employed mental health services and supports have

directly improved a particular student's physical and psychological safety, performance, or social emotional learning. To supplement research and data, personal stories tend to have a lasting impact on influential policy makers.

7. Invite legislators, in collaboration with other school personnel, to visit your school(s).

Legislators are invited to hundreds of events a month so you need something special to get them to attend. Make your invitations personal and be determined to include them. During the visit, be sure to tell them about the specific services you provide and students you know who need or are benefiting from positive behavioral intervention strategies or school-employed mental health services. Be sure to also share any effective crisis response and school safety practices that your school implements. Make sure that you receive administrative approval for these visits and include your school district staff and administrators on invitations and events.

8. Connect with your legislator via social media. Many legislators are communicating via social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc). Connecting with them by "following them," sending "direct messages," or "posting" to their page can provide a link to the legislators. However, caution must be exercised with using your own personal social media account to send messages. It is advised that you establish a "professional" account and avoid personal messages or posts on this account.

8. Lastly, remember to keep track of your "connections." Keep a record of any contacts that you, your family, or friends may have with elected officials. These "connections" help personalize the relationship, build rapport, and will help the elected official have a greater interest in your work. You should also keep a record of contacts made with your elected official including meetings (date, time), issues you discussed, and any other personal tidbits that help personalize and prioritize your issues. To stay up to date on current policy issues, be sure to visit *Policy Matters*, NASP's policy and advocacy blog.