



Your public schools
in fiscal peril
**Running out of time
& options**

A D V O C A C Y T O O L K I T

***Be an advocate
for students in
your community
and throughout
the state.***

*Your voice
can make a
difference...*

School districts throughout New York are facing a fiscal crisis. The downturn of the national economy—coupled with inadequate and inequitable state aid, costly mandates and the state's tax levy limit—has challenged public schools to continue to provide a high-quality education to all students with significantly fewer resources. As a result, districts are making devastating cuts to educational programs as they adjust to rising costs that are outpacing revenue.

District leaders throughout our area have been working with staff and community members to find creative ways to weather the economic storm without sacrificing the integrity of their educational programs. Yet without meaningful and timely relief from our government leaders, students and parents throughout the state risk losing the high level of public education that they have come to know and value throughout the years. In fact, the Class of 2012 may have received the best education that districts will be able to offer for the foreseeable future.

The time for change is now. The voices of school leaders and lobbyists for state-level education groups simply are not enough, as recent legislative sessions have shown. Elected officials need to hear from you, their constituents. They need to hear from the people who are most directly impacted by their decisions (or indecisions) year after year—the students, parents, employees, residents, community groups and business owners of New York.

But what can I do?

Advocacy takes many forms. It could be a note to an elected official, a comment made during a public forum, a letter to a newspaper editor or formal testimony at public hearings. It could be as simple as chatting with neighbors to clear up misunderstandings about education issues or sharing education-related stories with a local civic organization during monthly meetings.

Becoming an advocate for education is not as hard as you might think. Anyone can become involved, at any level they choose. The only prerequisite necessary is a desire to fight for our students and our community schools.

Effective advocates do their homework. They know the issues and plan their communication. Most of all, they give their time to advance their cause.

Enclosed in this packet you will find several tools to help you become an advocate for education. Thank you for taking the time to advocate on behalf of our children and for helping to ensure that they receive the high-quality education they deserve.



Resources available at educationspeaks.org:

- List of legislators by school district
- Social media directory for local legislators
- Links to statewide educational organizations advocacy resources, and legislative position information.
- More to come!

Advocacy checklist

Concerned citizens at community forums and public meetings often wonder what they can do to help our students.

The answer: Complete one or more of the items on the advocacy checklist below. Then encourage your friends and neighbors to do the same!

Empower yourself

- Choose an issue affecting your schools and learn about that issue. Attend a school board meeting, read local and statewide education publications, or visit your school district's website to get started.
- Develop and hone a "laser talk"—a short, focused message—about the issue you chose. A "laser talk" should briefly identify a problem, present a solution, and issue a call to action. It is a very useful tool when you have only a minute or two of someone's attention and you want to get a point across.

Advocate with your elected representatives

- Send a letter or email to local legislators.
- Call local legislators and schedule face-to-face meetings.
- Establish a relationship with the aides in legislators' local offices.
- Attend and ask questions at town hall meetings hosted by local legislators.
- Invite a local legislator to be your guest at a special event at your school.
- Ask local legislators to agree to take a leadership role on your selected issue.

Advocate through the media

- Write a letter to a newspaper editor and send your published letter to local legislators.
- Copy editorials or newspaper articles about your selected issue and send them to local legislators with a personal note.

Advocate in the community

Use social media to spread the word about what you are advocating for:

- Update your Facebook or Twitter status with a key point from your "laser talk."
- Share links to relevant news articles or information from your school district's website or from www.educationspeaks.org
- Invite people to participate in events in your community or online (virtual meetings) that are organized by you, the school district or another advocate.
- Follow legislators' social media accounts and feel free to reach out to them using these communication tools.
- Host a discussion about your selected issue at a local business in your community.

Some more traditional ways to get the word out:

- Organize a letter-writing campaign.
- Team up with a school leader to speak to a local community group.
- Participate in a community forum about your selected issue.

What does effective advocacy look like?

Personal contact with legislators helps build relationships and establish lines of communication that ensure that the district's story is being heard. Whether you choose to contact your representatives by phone, email or in-person, please keep in mind the following tips to help you convey your message in the most effective way possible:

- **Be brief.** Stick to your key points and be mindful that legislators are often very busy and face a variety of special interest groups that compete for their time and attention.
- **Be respectful.** Even if you disagree on a position, be respectful in your dialogue and stick to the facts. When appropriate be passionate, not emotional.
- **Be clear and specific.** Let legislators know exactly what you want them to do (i.e., vote in favor of a bill, pass legislation) in a way that requires a “yes” or “no” response. Ask them how they will vote, follow-up on your conversation, and hold them accountable.
- **Be a reliable source of information.** Research your issue and know the facts so that you can provide information to legislators and answer their questions. Do not assume that legislators know specifics about the school district or education issues in general. Be prepared to follow-up with answers to any questions you may not know on the spot.
- **Be honest about your concerns.** Paint the real picture of your situation, even if it is scary. Share the ramifications for your community's schools and children. Use personal or compelling stories coupled with facts and data.
- **Be timely and persistent.** If an issue has a deadline, such as the passage of the state budget, make sure you give legislators enough time to respond to the issue. Frequent, regular reminders about the importance of the issue, particularly from multiple advocates, can increase the likelihood that legislators will pay attention to the cause.

Let legislators know exactly what you want them to do (i.e., vote in favor of a bill, pass legislation)...

Tips for effective written correspondence

Some forms of written communication are more effective than others. While emails and form letters are fine, personal letters (perhaps even hand-written) convey a stronger message. They demonstrate the importance of your concerns by showing you went out of your way to make them known. Writing a letter and making a follow-up phone call takes a few minutes, but those steps ensure that your legislator knows just how you want to be represented.

When writing a letter, you should:

- Keep your letter short; a single page is best.
- Be concise and specific, but add personal touches on how your selected issue impacts you and your family.

The letter should include the following parts:

- Introduction
- Problem statement
- Proposed solution
- Conclusion and call to action
- Be sure to include all of your contact information (e.g., home address, phone number, email address), so your legislator can reply to you.
- Be sure to identify yourself as a constituent and an active voter.

Tips for effective in-person meetings

A face-to-face meeting with your legislator is a great way to personalize an issue, and to make sure that your feedback is heard. It is also a great opportunity to educate your representatives about a particular issue and to answer any questions they may have on the topic. Community members can choose to meet with legislators on an individual basis, or go in as a small group (no more than two to three people).

Before the meeting

- *Make an appointment*
- *Prepare for the meeting*
 - Define your goals*
 - Gather the facts*
 - Gather data*
- *Practice your talking points*
- *Reconfirm the meeting by phone a few days before your appointment*

During the meeting

- *Be on time*
- *Introduce yourself*
- *Be polite*
- *Stay on topic*
- *Tell the legislator why you are there*
 - Give background on your issue*

-Tell your story and explain the impact of any action/inaction

-Make your recommendation or request for action

- *Get a commitment*
- *Allow time for questions*
- *Respect the legislator's schedule and end the meeting on time*
- *Leave your contact information and any supporting materials*

After the meeting

- *Send a thank you note*
- *Follow-up on action items*
- *Sustain the relationship*

GENERAL "DO'S AND DON'TS" FOR TALKING WITH LEGISLATORS

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce yourself and identify which cause you are associated with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overwhelm legislators with excessive facts, figures, or jargon
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank them for their service to the community and for their time to meet with you and/or read your letter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecture your legislator
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that you are a constituent and have every right to express your opinions, ideas, and concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be rude or intimidating
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stick to a few key points ("laser talk") when communicating with legislators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get into a lengthy conversation that strays from the original topic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get back to legislators with answers to questions they may have 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overstay your allotted meeting time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for some sort of action from the legislator, and follow-up to be sure that action was taken 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be afraid to admit when you do not know the answer to a question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a relationship with the aides in your legislator's office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect the legislators to be experts on the issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain your relationship with legislators throughout the year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underestimate your influence