



PARENT TOOLKIT FOR LOBBYING LEGISLATORS

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WELCOME

Dear BEST Moms, Dads, and Grandparents:

In America, parental rights are under assault. We must continue to unite together in protecting our children from politicians and special interest groups that do not have our kids' best interests in mind. In the last year it has become increasingly popular for some elected officials to claim to side with parents and stand for parental rights in education. We have to ask - do their words match their actions? Have they introduced policies and legislation that support school choice, transparency, and an unbiased curriculum? At the end of the day they are politicians who will stay true to their word only if they know that, in 2022, we are not going away and that we are going to hold them accountable. That is why it is more important than ever that parents—yes, parents—learn how to become **Lobbyists**.

As a former school board member and a mom of three school aged children currently attending the public school system and a grandmother, I value the importance of parental involvement in education. Despite what the educrats might think, I believe wholeheartedly that parents know their children best and that, when it comes to our children, it simply does not matter how many PhDs or degrees a person may have. When it comes to our kids, we are the experts.

Nobody knows how to advocate for children better than their parents and family. Lobbying might seem like something only done by professionals in Washington, DC, but in fact is accessible to anyone with the time and energy to get it done. The goal of any lobbying effort is to influence key decision makers to adopt positions or policies that align with yours. This is true whether we are talking about legislation already introduced or we are trying to get a bill onto the legislative calendar.

What's the goal? In schools across our country, hyper-partisan teachers unions and liberal politicians have been foisting political agendas into our classrooms, lobbying to keep children out of school, and pushing for vaccine and mask mandates to be forced on our children. Often, it can seem daunting to try and come up with effective solutions to push back against this anti-Constitutional, bureaucratic nightmare, even in school choice states. Many parents might be surprised to learn that your state lawmakers and school board members have the decision-making power when it comes to public education in this country. With that in mind, BEST is excited to introduce this lobbying toolkit to give you the resources and know-how to advocate for our children to lawmakers, local media, and state education department officials, returning the power back into the hands of parents. This toolkit will walk you through the process and action step to consider when trying to influence your state leadership.

While tremendous work has been done to push for school choice and free our classrooms of political agendas, more work can be done to change the nature of public education and give absolute freedom of choice to parents. I invite you to join us—as parents and activists—in lobbying for academic transparency, school choice, and parental rights in 2022.

Sincerely, 

Director of Education Reform | **FreedomWorks**

Cell: 202-455-9845 or 772-643-5700
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MISSION STATEMENT & THEORY OF ACTION

Building Education for Students Together's mission is to ignite a national parent-led movement by building, educating, and mobilizing the largest network of parent activists in the country to advocate for their children's education through the election of school board members and the passage of policies that align with our vision of expanding education freedom.

To achieve our mission, BEST is committed to creating a long-term impact through grassroots outreach by mobilizing our network of parent activists across the country with the purpose of uniting into state-based parent coalitions to protect parents' rights to be their children's primary educators and equipping them with the tools to give their child and every child in their community the best opportunities possible.

FOCUS AREAS

1. PARENT-LED COALITIONS

Parents are the only force large enough to impact our education system in the long term. BEST will build and empower state-specific parent-led coalitions to realize this reform. These coalitions will engage in local and state policy issues to enhance parents' rights and create opportunities for their children.

2. SCHOOL CHOICE

Competition breeds excellence, but teachers unions are determined to protect the government education system's status quo. It is essential to give parents a choice to determine the best learning environment for their children. This choice is achieved by ensuring that the funding follows the students, whether they attend private school, charter schools, public schools, or are homeschooled. BEST will continue to work state by state to introduce Education Savings Accounts, Tax Credit Scholarships, and voucher programs. Over the years, we've seen parents and students around the country forced into underperforming school districts with no room for alternatives. Each student brings unique capabilities and learning styles into the classroom, and the current one-size-fits-all approach leaves them underserved. We must protect and promote school choice to provide students with greater opportunities.

3. ANTI-AMERICAN CONTENT

Critical Race Theory, The 1619 Project, and Common Core standards have paved the way for biased, anti-American, subjective curricula. With a decline in students' reading on grade level and increased high school dropout rates, it is more important than ever to get back to teaching the basics and spend less time socially engineering children with vicious, destructive propaganda. We must counter the anti-American narrative by regaining local control of the curriculum through parent involvement, legislative action, transparent textbook and content adoption, and the election of high-quality school board members, district by district.

4. CANDIDATES

Parents have been ignored long enough. To transform local school systems across the country, we must identify and elect like-minded board members. The responsibility is all of ours to elect individuals who have our children's best interests at heart. BEST is actively engaged in recruiting, training, and educating the community about local school board candidates who understand that parents are the final authority in their children's education.



ACTION STEP 1: PREPARING YOURSELF

Know Your Issues - and Yourself

The first step to successful lobbying is knowing what you're going to talk about with the decision maker, whether that person be your local school board member or a state legislator. It is best to define an actionable goal(s), such as a piece of legislation you want introduced, legislation you want supported (or opposed) by your decision maker, or policies you want introduced by your state's Department of Education or local school board.

The 5 W's of Knowing Your Policy/Legislation

- > **WHO** holds the power to get this done - Am I pushing for legislation to be introduced by a state senator or representative? Do I want to see a policy change from the Department of Education?

Ex: School Choice legislation will go through the legislative process in your state, whereas mask mandates can be implemented by local school boards or your state's Department of Education.

- > **WHAT** are the practical effects - What will happen on day one of my goal being reached? With legislation, often there is an amount of time before full implementation of the new law. You want to know what is going to change for people's day-to-day lives as a result of what you are lobbying for.
- > **WHEN** is it possible to get this done - What is the timeframe? For a piece of legislation, you've got to see it introduced, through committee sessions, brought for a reading to the full floor, debated for possible amendments, and finally voted on in both chambers of a bicameral legislature. This process can take anywhere from a couple weeks to a couple months or more.
- > **WHERE** is the best place to meet my decision maker - do I want to schedule a meeting with them in their office? Are they holding a constituent town hall or event based on this issue? Can I reasonably invite them to a discussion on my terms, either with my organization or personally?
- > **WHY** is this issue relevant right now - and how many people are involved in the discussion around this issue?

Do not be surprised if, after you complete these steps, it appears you are more knowledgeable than the individual you are lobbying. Lawmakers and their staff do not know everything about all things. Similarly, do not become nervous or anxious if you don't know the answer to a particular point or question they may have. Be willing to pursue the answer and report back to them.

Knowing Yourself:

- > **How well do I know the issues I'm preparing to lobby for/against?** You want to make sure you have answers to the 5 W's for your issue or policy. You also want to know whether

you are advocating for something to be introduced or if the issue is already being discussed by decision makers. If you are comfortable discussing the issue in specific detail among family, friends, and fellow activists, that's a good clue you've come to a solid point of understanding on the topic.

- > **What personal story can I bring to bolster my credibility on this issue?** Decision makers are still normal people, and storytelling is a powerful tool to highlight the problem you seek to address or the reasons why you (and possibly others) are invested in this issue.
- > **Does my professional experience lend credibility to my lobbying?** If you work in a field related to education or children, your ability to speak credibly on these issues is assumed. Of course, you DO NOT need to be a professional to advocate for your ideas.
- > **Am I comfortable lobbying alone or do I work better with groups?** Oftentimes, lobbying in organized groups can be the most effective way to arrange ideas and demonstrate the breadth of support your position has.
- > **Have I made contact with and followed up with those I am trying to influence?** Introducing yourself to the people you want to lobby before you make the ask is important to establishing rapport. It goes a long way to reach out to their office and maintain cordial contacts with their staff. If they are hosting events in the near future, often found on their website or social media, make an effort to attend if possible.

ACTION STEP 2: LEARN THE PROCESS AND STUDY YOUR DECISION MAKERS

Before an idea becomes a bill and a bill becomes a law, there are many steps and procedures that will take place. Understanding these steps from start to finish will not only improve the quality of your lobbying efforts, but can also give you great institutional knowledge of how the legislative process works. All states in the US, save for Nebraska, have a bi-cameral legislature, meaning they have a separate House and Senate. For a bill to be signed into law, it needs to pass both of these chambers. You will want to consider where the policy you are advocating for is in this process, if anywhere. Another thing to remember - a bill can fail at any point during the process until it is signed into law. Shepherding an idea into a bill and then into a law is a continuous process. With this in mind, it is important to come up with a realistic timeline for the legislative process to pass your legislative priority.

Familiarize Yourself with the Website for your State

It is important for any activist or lobbyist to have an understanding of how the legislative calendar works and what it looks like in the state where they are focusing their efforts. State legislatures have this calendar, which may be a proper calendar or a meeting and dates, available on their official websites. You will want to familiarize yourself with website for your state. These official websites usually also include a list of Bills passed or being considered during that legislative session. Another resource is legiscan.com, which tracks bills currently being considered in every state and their sponsors.

From an Idea to a Bill

So, you might find yourself wondering: "How do I write a bill?" While BEST and our sister organizations are excited to help do a lot of the work getting formal bills written, or coordinating bills and templates between groups, it is worthwhile to understand the process for yourself. You do not compose legislation like a regular essay, article, or column. Rather, there is a special style of writing that characterizes bills and resolutions.

Bills are written using a unique legislative draft style. There are specific formats for the title page and first few paragraphs of a bill. All bills will begin with both their full and short/working title in the header information. Then, if there are definitions needed to help the bill make sense, those will usually come immediately after the title. The bill then begins to resemble a series of small paragraphs dictating what it will do, how it can be enforced (if at all), and any appropriation (funding) it requires. Finally, information about implementation is included. An example of a drafted bill is included in the next section.

SAMPLE BILL FORMAT

ITALICS = DIRECTIONS (TYPE YOUR INFORMATION OR DELETE)

109th Congress

1st Session

Senate Bill # _____

A Bill For An Act Entitled: *Title of bill*

or

An Amendment to the Constitution Entitled: *Title of amendment*

In the Senate

Write the date

Write: Senators *Your names* introduced the following resolution which was referred to the Committee on *fill in this blank when you know the committee name.*

Senate Proposal

Resolved by the U.S. Senate of the United States of America, that the following article is proposed as federal law under the jurisdiction of the United States of America, enforceable by Executive action.

For a bill: "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that:"

For an Amendment: "Be it amended by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that:"

Section 1: *Explanation of terminology- Which terms need to be defined in order to understand the bill?*

Section 2: *What is the act going to do? Who is going to be involved / impacted / affected by the act*

Section 3: *Where? All of U.S. or a certain area / place in the U.S.?*

Section 4: *How is the act going to be funded? Who is going to enforce / administer this act? (Which government agency will oversee the bill and its duties?)*

Section 5: *Penalties (if any) for non-compliance (not following the rules) of the act*

Section 6: *Enactment Date: When will the law go into effect?*

END

From a Bill to a Law

The first step to turning your bill into law is, of course, to get a sponsor in both the House and Senate of your state legislature. Once a bill has been introduced to the legislature through the first reading, it will be sorted to the committee best able to debate its contents. The most successful education bills are introduced by a legislator on the education committee in the House and Senate. The committee can sit on the bill and do nothing or schedule hearings and debates for it at the discretion of the chairman (making the chairman an especially important figure in this process). Once the bill has been sufficiently debated and possibly subject to “mark-ups” (changes), the committee will be given the opportunity to vote it out to the floor for a full house debate or vote it down. If a bill is voted down, it is considered to have died in committee, similar to if it was never brought up.

If the bill is advanced to the full chamber (be it House or Senate) then the real drive begins. There will oftentimes be a second reading of the bill. Occasionally this step is not automatic. Nevertheless, the bill is added to the calendar for the chamber and amendments can be introduced at this time. At the end of this process, the bill is put up for a vote. If passed, it will move on to the other chamber of the legislature. After a similar process is played out there, and if the bill is passed, it may go to a conference committee to address differences in the versions passed in both chambers. If a conference committee is not necessary, or after that has concluded, the bill then goes to the Governor to be signed into law or vetoed.

Know Your Decision Maker

To set yourself up for a successful lobbying trip or series, it is important to know who you are going to lobby and why you are interested in speaking to them. Understanding what influence the decision maker has on your preferred policy outcome is important, along with getting an idea of any public statements they have made about your policy. This way you can get definitive evidence, or at least a general idea, of where they stand on the issue at hand. It is also valuable to still look into a legislator’s background for a meeting with someone on their staff.

Have I looked into:

- ❑ General Background (Party, Position, Constituency)?
- ❑ What committees or boards does this individual serve on?
- ❑ Proper job title, manner of address, and leadership positions?
- ❑ Their record on related legislation and/or votes?
- ❑ Their key staffers and support team?

The more you know about the individual you are lobbying, the better able you are to anticipate their questions and concerns, as well as their positive reactions to what you are advocating for.

Who are the Decision Makers?

When thinking about who the key decision makers are for a piece of legislation, you may find your mind thinking about major state senators and representatives, governors, and other politicians. However, it is important to understand that the first decision maker you encounter will typically be the legislator's executive assistant and/or legislative aide. These individuals are the gatekeepers to your legislator. Do not underestimate their role in the legislative process, because -if you can't be given the time to speak to your representatives- it is more than likely that you will not have much success earning their support for your initiative. Legislative advisors and aides typically hold major influence on the legislator you are asking to support or oppose your cause. The higher the office—for example, the governor, speaker of the house, or president of the senate—the more likely you will work only with their education or policy advisors during the entire process. In short, anyone who holds influence over the legislative process is a decision maker.

ACTION STEP 3: RELEASING THE POWER OF GRASSROOTS

Legislators set their priorities based on campaign promises, leadership, and important issues to their constituents. You will be competing with other interests and bills, some of them noble and good, for time on your decision maker's calendar. As parents, trying to influence or persuade the lawmakers to take our concerns on as a priority takes determination and resilience. In education there is no shortage of greed and power. Grassroots organizing is the key to presenting your interests as a priority in which a legislator should get involved.

Ready, Set, Go!

> READY: Is your parent army prepared to take action?

Your action plan is key to the passage of meaningful legislative change. Do not get bogged down with drafting the language of a bill. As parents and constituents, you should not be expected to know all the legalese. Legislators have access to an entire professional staff of bill-writers. The most important aspect for activists when meeting with legislators is understanding the issue at hand. What are the additions or changes you would like to see in law? Focus on the end result. A substitute for specific drafted language is to use similar language in bills passed or being considered in other states.

> SET: Have you finalized your action plan?

It is best to organize and prepare your action plan in phases according to the timeline you have established.

The timeline should be established based on your state calendar. Ideally you would want to have secured your education bill sponsor(s) before the education committee convenes prior to the legislative session.

However, don't give up if you missed this first deadline. Keep yourself laser focused on meeting with your state leadership. These individuals—for example, the chairman of the education committee in your state senate—have the most influence on your school choice or other education-related legislation.

As the captain of the team, you must understand who all the players are and how everyone can take a role in executing the action plan. Remember to keep in mind that everyone has individual strengths and weaknesses. Assess the strengths of your grassroots team and assign tasks amongst yourselves in a way that will give everyone a role and allow their skills to support your goals.

> **GO:** How do I get started implementing my action plan?

The most important thing to remember is to always move forward with confidence. Stay in communication with your team of volunteers. Host routine Zoom meetings to keep activists informed and engaged throughout the legislative process. Assigning team roles and responsibilities based on individual time and strengths will make moving forward go much more smoothly. Some key roles to look into assigning include:

Sample roles and task for volunteers

Point Person: These individuals are the ones who have been tasked with meeting with legislators for in-person meetings. These individuals are also the ones you want to have as your main points of contact for the media. Meeting with legislators and the media can be very intimidating. As group leaders, we have to recognize our own weaknesses and ask others to take on these roles if we are uncomfortable with taking the lead in these areas.

Media Contact: Be cautious. One slip of the tongue could derail the entire public perception of the initiative. These individuals must be vetted and fully aware of the issue. These people should be those who can stay on point, report the facts, and be seen as ambassadors for the cause.

Group Presenters: These individuals coordinate and organize opportunities to share the legislative goals and mission to like-minded groups and individuals who can help influence lawmakers.

Public Comments: These individuals are needed to make public comments during legislative committee meetings. It's important not to ignore this task because this is your brief opportunity to connect with the media and the legislators you have not been able to reach.

Researchers: These individuals are good at researching and keep the group accountable, up to date, and informed on media, connections, and relevant news.

Social Media influencers: These individuals can help keep the public informed and the lawmakers aware. Most lawmakers have social media accounts. Use social media to your benefit by tagging the lawmakers you want to influence.

Writers: These individuals are responsible for writing and submitting op-eds and letters to the editor.

Grassroots Lobbying Activities

In-person meeting: Emails and phone calls are extremely important; however, the impact made in person can not be stressed enough. Develop your core team of activists to make scheduled meetings. These individuals should know the issue and must represent the greater good of the group when meeting with the key legislators. Will they be able to present the issue, ask for the call of action without getting long winded, able to answer questions, and able to respectfully disagree with a legislator who doesn't agree with the mission? We will discuss organizing your in-person meetings and assigning roles in the "Lobbying a Lawmaker" section.

Emails and Phone Calls: Do not underestimate the critical importance of launching these two campaigns together when trying to influence targeted legislators. EVERYONE should be sending and calling the targeted legislators. Keep in mind you are building your plan out in phases, layers, and steps. When we take action, we do so in steps. However, if the task of making phone calls and sending emails is not fulfilled by EVERYONE, then your efforts might not ever be completed as planned. Look at it as a platform landing to this entire process of lobbying. Of all the steps we take, none of these will matter if we do not show that we are united by numbers.

Individuals with less time to commit can and should focus on emailing or calling their legislators' offices.

ACTION STEP 4: CONTACTING YOUR LEGISLATORS

Getting Started - Requesting a Meeting

Lawmakers and officials have many staff members, such as chiefs of staff, legislative directors, policy specialists, and schedulers. To start, you'll want to get in contact with the scheduler for your decision maker. Their information is sometimes available on official websites for politicians, but calling into the office to request the information is also an option.

Once you know who you are going to contact, the next step is to draft an email to that person.

TO: email of scheduler/point of contact in office

Subject: Meeting with [Legislator] concerning [bill/policy proposal]

Dear [scheduler/point of contact's name],

[Greeting]. My name is [Your Name] and I am with [Name of Organization]. I wanted to see if I could schedule a meeting with [Legislator] or [his or her] policy staffer focused on education. [Name of Organization] is supporting [bill/policy proposal] and I wanted to discuss this issue with [legislator] as a stakeholder in the education system in [State]. Please get back to me at your earliest convenience with some times that work for your office, and I will make myself available!

[Salutation],
[Your Name]
[Your Organization]

Be prepared to work around the schedule of the person you are trying to lobby, as state legislators and officials often have busy schedules, even if their jobs are sometimes technically part time. As mentioned before, it is more than possible that you will be offered to meet instead with a policy specialist or other staffer in the office. This is not a problem or a downgrade, as these individuals often have major responsibilities and influence over their policy fields and will help you establish a reputation with the office that you can take into future meetings.

Create Events

Do not be afraid to create your own events to lobby a decision maker. These can either be events that you organize with volunteers to lobby together, or events you organize to invite a legislator or decision maker to. You can:

- ❑ Ask your legislator to attend a town hall meeting to hear the concerns of constituents.
- ❑ Organize Capitol Days with other grassroots organizations or activists.
- ❑ Start Letters to the Editor Campaigns.
- ❑ Organize Campaigns to send emails or make telephone calls to the Leadership.

Looking for Events to Attend

Lawmakers and other public officials are, ideally, accountable to the public, so they often hold public events like town hall meetings or constituent events. These events are a great way to meet lawmakers and/or their staff and establish a relationship with them that will take your advocacy to the next level. These events are promoted on official websites for politicians, social media, and often enough through word of mouth.

Lobbying a Lawmaker

Lobbying lawmakers is key to the success of any legislative push. They decide not only how they're going to vote on a certain issue, but also what the calendar of votes will be and the speed at which a bill can move forward. When going in to lobby lawmakers and their staff, there are some key tactics you and your group can employ to make your advocacy as effective as it can possibly be, and some pitfalls to avoid.

DO

- Dress professionally (business casual or business attire).
- Refer to lawmakers and their staff formally until given alternative forms of address.
- Set an AGENDA before going into the meeting.
- Create/Have supplementary print-outs for your bill or policy.
- Personalize your advocacy with stories and examples.
- Explain the background of your bill or policy before making an "ask."

DON'T

- > Be late for a scheduled meeting.
- > Shame individuals for previous positions.
- > Become angry or hostile if they don't take your position or offer counterpoints.
- > Ask to extend or have another meeting with the same office on the day you lobby.

Setting the right Agenda

Setting a reasonable, simple, and straightforward agenda is a very important part of the lobbying process. You are better prepared to deal with changing circumstances and any nerves you might have speaking to a public official or legislator when you have a set vision of what to say and when. Often, it is helpful when writing an agenda to assign your team roles and approximate times for that part of the agenda to be covered.

Meeting Agenda 1/25/2022

Location: FreedomWorks Offices, 111 First Street NE

Time: 3:00pm

Purpose: To Lobby Rep. Jones to support school choice

Agenda Items:

- 1. 3:00pm-3:05pm** Greetings and Introductions (Mark)
- 2. 3:05pm-3:15pm** Present the issue of school choice and the positive impact it will have on your state's education system and families (Amy)
- 3. 3:15pm-3:20pm** Share our personal story about school choice and why we think its necessary in our state (Alyssa)
- 4. 3:20-3:30pm** Begin to close meeting, make the "ask" (Mark), address any questions, and go over any action items from meeting (ALL)
- 5. 3:30pm** Conclude meeting

Organizing your Team

Lobbying as a part of a team is a great way to not only support your fellow activists, but also to show strength in numbers. Assigning roles for team members is key to ensuring that people aren't confused and don't attempt to all speak on the same point at the same time. Some example roles are detailed below, in order of priority to have in your meeting

- Meeting leader (Point Person): Makes introductions, runs the meeting, keeps track of time and the agenda
- Meeting recorder: Takes notes on what happened and what you, or they, promised to do. This role is very important when the time to follow up comes
- Story teller: Shares a compelling story
- Delivery person: Presents materials such as fact sheets and one-pagers signed by members, such as petitions, postcards, and letters
- Pitch person: Makes the legislative “ask”

Impacting the Committee Process

The Committee process is one of the most important in the life of a piece of legislation. The first stop for any bill introduced to the legislature is a Committee. The bill is assigned to the committee most relevant to its contents; for example a bill on expanding a state court would be sent to the judiciary committee, not the education committee.

Committees hold public hearings for some bills, which presents an opportunity for stakeholders and organizations to testify as to the effectiveness of the legislation. This is a major way you can impact the committee process. Alternatively, lobbying efforts can be targeted to legislators on the committee debating passage of a bill. These legislators will be more knowledgeable about specific issues and topics through their work on the committee. As you get deeper into the lobbying process for a piece of legislation, familiarizing yourself with the legislators on the committee your bill will be debated in is important.

ACTION STEP 5: LOBBYING THROUGH MEDIA

The media, for better or for worse, has a major role to play in the legislative process. This is true both for national publications and for smaller, more accessible statewide papers and websites. These publications play a role in shaping the conversation on an issue or bill, and will make their way into the offices of state legislators and local officials. Therefore, it is important for you to familiarize yourself with the key publications in your state and how you can interact with them to shape the conversation on education - in effect lobbying through the media.

Examples of Some Key Publications

1. The Arizona Republic (AZ)
2. South Florida Sun-Sentinel (FL)
3. Richmond Times-Dispatch (VA)
4. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (GA)
5. The Charlotte Observer (NC)
6. The Dallas Morning News (TX)
7. The Columbus Dispatch (OH)
8. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (PA)
9. The Denver Post (CO)

This list is not exhaustive

Op-Ed Writing

Opinion Editorials, known as “Op-Eds,” are a great tool in advocating new ideas or legislation. Newspapers will publish Op-Eds from stakeholders, experts, and everyday people provided the quality of writing is on par with the Newspaper. If you are looking for good examples of Op-Eds, national newspapers (*The Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Examiner*, *New York Post*, etc) have sections dedicated to their Opinion Editorials. Statewide or local publications similarly publish Op-Eds.

In an Op-Ed, you are taking a definitive position on an issue or proposing a solution to a problem you introduce. You are encouraged to be opinionated, so long as you are well sourced and can defend your position in the editorial. Op-Eds are typically around 750 words, but you will want to reach out to the editor and confirm as each newspaper is different. Begin by reading through some previous editorials in your target publication. Get an idea for what they like to publish and what the writing generally looks like, as there will be variation depending on the author.

Karen Hiltz: Florida’s Education Freedom: Is it a Mirage?

By Guest Columnist - 01.25.22



Looking at states that offer school choice options, Florida is a state that has legislated several programs. However, do these programs provide benefits for all families and children? The quick answer is no because legislated programs are always targeted towards specific populations while interjecting limited or minimal dollars.

Florida Options

Families in Florida are better off than in most states when it comes to school choice options. Like all other states, parents can choose from the three primary groups: public, private, and homeschool. The **Florida Department of Education** website identifies six categories with the first listing the seven scholarship programs the state offers. The next two categories provide specific information relevant to private and charter schools including directories that allow parents to quickly search by the school district. Another category—Other Choice Options—provides homeschool information along with some nuanced programs that fall under the purview of public education. The Virtual Education category addresses what Florida offers for those parents interested in this option. Overall, the website provides information and is rather easy to navigate.

Letter to the Editor Campaigns

In addition to writing Op-Eds, another easy way to impact legislation through media is to organize Letter to the Editor Campaigns. A “Letter to the Editor” is a common way for individuals to get their messages, questions, and opinions printed. Newspapers will provide information for you to use when sending in a letter and will publish a selection of letters they receive on a recurring basis. These letters should be focused on local issues and not come off like a commercial pitch.

Organizing a campaign of grassroots individuals to send letters to the editor for key publications is a fantastic way to influence the news cycle and get your bills, policies, or messages published. Spreading our message increases the chance we will contact more concerned parents and grow our grassroots movement. With that in mind, note that papers will often print only letters from people in their area of distribution. So stay local!

Tips for Writing a Letter to the Editor:

- Keep it short and address only one subject. Generally, 200 words or fewer is most effective.
- Know the maximum word count allowed and do not exceed it. Many newspapers have strict limits on the length of letters and have limited space to publish them.
- Carefully highlight the key takeaways the reader should remember.
- Do not attempt to spam Letters to the Editor from the same individual in a short period, especially if your letter gets published.

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Letters to the Editor: March 9, 2021

Treasure Coast Newspapers
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Does the IRC school district need a new ‘chief equity and diversity officer’?

The Indian River County school district has been under a court order since the 1960s to desegregate county schools, which evolved into regular negotiations with the NAACP on improving minority educational outcomes. I’m told that as a result of these negotiations, the district is hiring a senior-level chief equity and diversity officer to the tune of \$100,000 plus benefits, staff, offices, etc.

Hosting Press Conferences

If you plan to hold a “call to action” event, such as a rally or a march, or if you plan to speak publicly about your legislative priorities, one way to maximize your impact is to hold a press conference before the event.

Press conferences are designed for you to be able to speak directly to the media on a topic of interest to the general public. Adding public pressure to your campaign, enhanced by any media coverage, is a great tactic for moving on-the-fence legislators into your camp and to keep those already supporting you focused.

To have a successful press conference, there are 10 basic steps to follow. These 10 basics can also be found in BEST’s Parent Empowerment Toolkit.

10 Press Conference Basics:

1. Send out a press release to invite the media. Post the press release on social media and look up the email addresses of any local reporters who have been covering relevant issues. Blast out an email to them using the BCC function.
2. Determine who the point of contact will be for the conference and make sure that this person is prepared to answer questions from the media.
3. When calling for a press conference, make sure that you have a minimum of 15 to 20 parents to join you. The more, the better.
4. Before you start the conference, make sure your attendees know to surround you during the press conference with signs. There is strength in numbers, and you want the video clips and photos the media uses to show it.
5. Prepare to have at least three speakers during the conference.
6. Keep the conference short, to approximately between three and five minutes per speaker.
7. Know your speakers and avoid having random attendees speak during the conference. It takes only one person who is off the message to discredit the focus and intent of your efforts.
8. Begin the conference on time with the point person and wrap up with the point person.
9. Wrap up: After the designated speakers conclude, your point person will need to wrap up the conference with instructions for the attendees. For instance:
 - A. If it is a march, give directions to the place to which you are heading.
 - B. If it is a rally, make sure the attendees and audience are given the next steps. Call the board members. Speak at this board meeting, or at the next board meeting, etc.
 - C. If you are organizing parents to speak at a board meeting, send out talking points ahead of time to solidify your concerns and remind parents to stay on point. Open up the floor for two or three media questions. Share the microphone and bounce questions back and forth with your fellow activists.



10. Never feel that you have to answer all the questions the media ask you. If it is off topic or going down a rabbit hole, just say, “We are here to talk about xyz” or say, “No comment.”

Issuing Press Release or Letter in Response

Press releases are official memos from a group or notable individual announcing a policy or responding to decisions made by other organizations/officials. A press release should be formal and direct. It should include only just enough information to spark the interest of the reporter. It is best to keep the press release to a one-page document. Incorporate quotes in the press release with your call to action, which should include the time and location of the event. Include links to the school board agenda or to data that can validate your message. Most importantly, when sending a press release, the point of contact will need to be accessible for questions and on-the-record interviews with the media. Use the following checklist to prepare your press release.

- Use a consistent formal template
- Use Verdana, AP style
- Use direct, formal language
- Include contact information
- Include call to action details
- Include quotable quotes

*****TEMPLATE*****

[Name]

[Phone number]

[Email address]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[Day of week, date, year]

[Title]

[Location] -- [Intro]

[Name, title], commented:

“[quote]”

[Mission statement, website with hyperlink, etc.]

****EXAMPLE PRESS RELEASE****

Contact:

Peter Vicenzi

202-783-3870

pvicenzi@freedomworks.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, March 1, 2021

FreedomWorks Statement In Response to Continued Anti-Science Public School Board Hypocrisy

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- In response to reports from across the country that public school board officials continue to utilize private schools for their children while public schools remain closed, Laura Zorc, FreedomWorks' Director of Education Reform, commented:

"Once again, the fact that public school officials across the country are adamant about keeping students from participating in in-person learning, while at the same time sending their own children to attend private school underscores the rampant hypocrisy endemic to the public school system."

"Americans' tax dollars continue to flow into public school systems that are keen to play politics at the behest of left-wing teachers' unions. Students deserve better. They deserve the option to attend in-person learning-- something which is clearly safe according to health experts. Apparently, Democratic leaning teachers unions do not believe in 'the science' after all."

The mission of FreedomWorks is to build, educate, and mobilize the largest network of activists advocating the principles of smaller government, lower taxes, free markets, personal liberty, and the rule of law.

FAQ

What should I do if I can't connect with a decision maker?

Do not be surprised but do be persistent. If you are not getting a response from a legislator whose vote could persuade the outcome of your legislative efforts, then it's time to take it to the next level. Many state legislators give appointments only to their local constituents unless you are part of a state group or organization. Sometimes this can be problematic because legislators sitting on committees will not all be in your district; therefore, if you come across this road block, there are ways to strategically navigate around it, some of which are noted below:

- > If they refuse to meet with you because you are not a constituent in their district, give your small group a name. No matter if it's just you and three other moms trying to make a difference. Florida Parents Against Common Core started as a group of four moms that was created to circumvent the doors being closed to them by education committee members.
- > A very effective way to influence legislators who will not meet with you is to make a visit to the local GOP office in their district. Most offices have dedicated volunteers who are

concerned with the direction of education in America. These volunteers are the local party influencers. Pay the office a visit to share your concerns, resources, and ask for them to help you get an appointment.

- If nothing else works, it is beneficial to attend the local (REC) Republican Executive Committee meeting traditionally held once a month. At these meetings, visitors will traditionally be asked to introduce themselves; this is your opportunity to share in 60 seconds why you are there. Never show up to these meetings without your one pager. More than likely, the legislators or their staff will make a brief showing, and it's good for them to know that, if they will not allow you to meet with them, then you will go to their constituents for help.

Glossary of Terms to Understand

Amendment - An amendment is a change to a bill, introduced by a legislator, usually subject to a vote for its inclusion separate from the final vote for the bill.

Chamber - Refers to the individual body, either House or Senate, of a legislature. Also used as a term for the room where those senates are convened.

Speaker of the House - The Speaker of a legislative body is the head of that legislature. They are selected by a majority of the house, and are always from the majority party. They control appointments and the legislative calendar. Only lower chambers, like a house of representatives/ delegates, will have a speaker.

President/Leader of the Senate - The equivalent of the Speaker in the State Senate. They are the leader for the majority party in the Senate and have similar powers and responsibilities to the Speaker.

Appropriation - Appropriation is a catch-all term for laws or bills that provides an agency with budget authority. Appropriations is also used to describe bills that will affect or change government spending as it is currently situated.

Bill Dies in Committee - A bill that "dies" in committee is a bill that failed to get successfully voted out of the committee it was assigned to, therefore not going up for a second reading in the full legislature. A bill can die in committee either by being voted down by a majority of committee members, or by never coming up for a vote in the committee at all.

Bill Dies on the Floor - A bill that "dies" on the floor fails either to get a vote scheduled and is held up or is voted down by the house or senate of a state.

First Reading - The first reading of a bill introduces it to the legislature before it is immediately sorted to a committee.

Second Reading - The second reading, usually after the committee process, begins the stage when a bill is debated by the entire legislative chamber in which it was introduced.

Committee - A "committee" in a state legislature is a group of legislators assigned to focus on a specific set of issues. They are often called "standing committees." Most relevant to your lobbying will be any and all Education Committees. All committees and subcommittees (subcategory

of standing committees) have a chairman from the majority party and a ranking member from the minority party. Members of the relevant committees should be a special focus of lobbying efforts.

Conference Committee - As all but one state (Nebraska) in the US has a bicameral legislature (separate Senate and House), like the federal legislature, so a bill passed and amended in both chambers might have some differences in the final version voted on in each chamber. To settle these differences, a conference committee is planned to amend the bill so that a single version can pass both chambers. Occasionally, the differences are so minor that one chamber will just take up the version passed by another, and sometimes a vote is not required at all to settle the differences.

Sponsor - The sponsor of your bill will be the point person for other legislators and the main force to get it passed. To be introduced in a legislative chamber, a bill needs a sponsor, or sponsors. It is best to have at least one senate and house sponsor for your legislation.

State Leadership - State leaders include the governor, president of the senate, speaker of the house, and the heads of any education committees in the legislature of your state.

Session - A session refers to the period during which a legislature is meeting and working on legislation. Often, you will hear this term used as “in-session” to refer to the legislature’s lawmaking period and “out of session” to signify that the legislature is not currently meeting.

Veto - In most states, the Governor (Chief Executive) of the state has the power to veto bills passed by the combined legislature, similar to the President’s veto power. If a bill is vetoed by the Governor, it returns to the house either to be amended, be dropped, or, if it is possible, have the veto overridden.

Helpful Sources:

<https://indivisible.org/resource/indivisible-states-defining-strategy-your-state>

<https://indivisible.org/resource/indivisible-states-tactics-state-legislative-advocacy>



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