

# Grassroots Advocacy Toolkit:

## PTA and Grassroots Advocacy/Getting Involved

<http://www.pta.org/advocacy/01involved.asp>

At any given time, a PTA member may engage in a variety of activities that represent a spectrum or range of efforts in support of children—their own individual child, a group of children, or all children. We, as parents, usually start down the road of advocacy by speaking for our own children at parent-teacher conferences or with the school principal. We then begin to recognize that the other children in the classroom or school have similar needs. This continues to build until our activities reach advocating on the local, state, and national levels for all children.

The Parent Involvement component of the National Standards states that "parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families." If we do not take our advocacy outside the school building or community, we would not be taking full advantage of the "National Voice" PTA members have. Our strength is in our numbers.

### Advocacy vs. Lobbying

#### What is the difference between advocacy and lobbying?

Although most people use the words interchangeably, there is a distinction between advocacy and lobbying that is helpful to understand. Advocacy is the act of mobilizing individuals to spark changes in programs and policies, that benefit children, at the local, state, and national levels. Much of what your local PTA is doing to improve laws, policies, and conditions in your community falls under this category. Lobbying refers specifically to advocacy efforts that attempt to influence legislation. The laws limiting the lobbying done by nonprofit organizations do not govern other advocacy activities such as public rallies and volunteer activities.

#### What is the difference between grassroots lobbying and direct lobbying?

Grassroots lobbying focuses on appealing to the general public to contact the legislature about an issue. Direct lobbying is contacting government officials or employees directly to influence legislation. If an issue is to be decided through a ballot initiative or referendum, appeals to the public are considered direct lobbying, because the public in this instance acts as the decision maker. Nonprofits like the PTA may only devote 25 percent of their total lobbying expenditures to grassroots lobbying.

*Adapted with permission from the Connecticut Association of Nonprofits Advocacy/Lobbying Toolkit. Originally published in a different form by the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest in "Lobbying and Advocacy—Similarities and Differences" and "Public Policy Related Activities That Are Not Lobbying".*

### Setting the Stage for Advocacy

Advocacy is the act of mobilizing individuals to spark changes in programs and policies, that benefit children, at the local, state, and national levels. Much of what your local PTA is doing to improve laws, policies, and conditions in your community falls under this category.

Here are some examples of this at the local level:

- Talking to all parents about the importance of their participation in their children's education.
- Sitting down with the school principal to discuss issues concerning parents and students.
- Working with school officials to achieve PTA Parent Involvement Certification.
- Monitoring the implementation of testing standards in your school.
- Participating in a school board hearing highlighting the need to purchase new textbooks or computers.
- Building a coalition of parents, school administrators, and community leaders to design meaningful after-school activities.
- Distributing information about a school construction bond measure.
- Serving on the committee responsible for designing a wellness policy for your child's school.

Parents play a major advocacy role by being full partners in all decision-making affecting their children. Through this joint involvement, PTA members become energized and engaged. And, with the skills they acquire through local advocacy activities, members can work effectively with PTA state and national leaders to tackle larger efforts to improve the education and well being of all children.

On the national level, PTA's advocacy efforts have led to positive changes in child labor laws, public health services, federal education laws, parent involvement policies, school lunch programs, juvenile justice protections, and mandatory immunizations. All of these changes occurred because of the consistent hard work and persuasion of PTA members just like you.

## "Inside" vs. "Outside" Lobbying

Effective lobbying requires coordination of two very different kinds of lobbying activity:

### "Inside" Lobbying

This form of lobbying takes place in the Capitol or directly with decision makers. It includes the following:

- Meetings with lawmakers and legislative staff
- Providing analysis and information to committees and legislative offices
- Testifying before a hearing
- Negotiating with policy makers and other lobby groups regarding specific parts of a bill

### "Outside" Lobbying

An effective lobbying campaign also requires activity outside the Capitol, aimed at shifting the politics and exerting pressure around the issue. Some of these activities include:

- Media activity including news conferences, editorial board visits, letters to the editor, and assisting reporters with stories
- Organizing local lobbying visits by constituents to their legislators
- Building broad and diverse coalitions
- Letter writing campaigns to legislators
- Activities such as organized rallies and marches

It is important that "outside" lobbying activities be coordinated with "inside" lobbying activity, to assure that they make strategic sense in terms of timing, targeting, and messages.

*Adapted with permission from the Connecticut Association of Nonprofits Advocacy/Lobbying Toolkit.*

## Why Lobby? Ten Reasons to Lobby for Your Cause

1. You can make a difference. In Toledo, Ohio, a single mother struggling to raise her son without the help of a workable child support system put an ad in a local newspaper to see if there were others who wanted to work for change. There were. Over time, they built the Association for Child Support Enforcement, which has helped change child support laws across the country.
2. People working together can make a difference. Mothers Against Drunk Driving convinced dozens of states to toughen their drunk driving laws. As a result, the numbers of drunk driving deaths are lower nationwide.
3. People can change laws. History is full of people and groups that fought against great odds to make great changes through child labor laws, public schools improvement, clean air and water laws, and social security reform. These changes were not easy to achieve. They all took the active involvement-the lobbying- of thousands of people who felt something needed to change.
4. Lobbying is a democratic tradition. Telling our policy makers how to write and change our laws is at the very heart of our democratic system. Lobbying has helped keep America's democracy evolving over more than two centuries.
5. Lobbying helps find real solutions. People thinking creatively and asking their elected officials for support can generate innovative solutions that overcome the root causes of a problem. Through this work, abused children have found rapid placement in safe homes, and restaurants have been able to donate excess food to food shelters.
6. Lobbying is easy. Lobbying is simple to master. In fact, you can learn how to lobby-whom to call, when to call, and what to say- in minutes. There are a few simple reporting rules to follow, but they aren't complicated.
7. Policy makers need your expertise. Few institutions are closer to peoples' real problems than nonprofits and community groups. Every professional lobbyist will tell you that personal stories are powerful tools for change. People and policy makers can learn from your story.
8. Lobbying helps people. Everything that goes into a lobbying campaign-the research, the strategy planning, the phone calls, and visits- will help fulfill your goal whether it be finding a cure for cancer, beautifying the local park, or some other cause that helps those around you.
9. The views of PTAs are important. Because local governments often decide how to spend federal and state money, local organizations have even more responsibility to tell local policy makers what is needed and what will work. Your lobbying can have an immediate, concrete effect on people in need.
10. Lobbying advances your cause and builds public trust. Building public trust is essential to nonprofit organizations and lobbying helps you to gain it by increasing your organization's visibility. Just as raising funds and recruiting volunteers are important to achieving your organization's mission, lobbying is just as crucial.

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*Originally published in a different form by the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest in "Ten Reasons to Lobby for Your Cause".*

# Grassroots Advocacy Toolkit: Putting it All Together

<http://www.pta.org/advocacy/07resources.asp>

Create a written plan in which you identify PTA goals, organizational capacity, target audiences, potential allies, opposition, and the activities to be pursued. Filling out a "Strategy Chart" is a useful way to collect the necessary information in one place.

Once your advocacy effort is complete, evaluate your success by asking the following questions:

- Is our PTA a more powerful and better-trained advocacy network?
- What has been successful and what would we do differently?
- Have we built membership with our efforts or generated positive publicity for our PTA?

## Resources

There are a number of available resources for PTA leaders and members.

### \* Resolutions and Positions

A complete book of current and retired resolutions is available in state PTA offices or through the state PTA president. These provide the authority for any advocacy position you may take.

### \* The PTA Legislative Program

Resolutions and position statements provide the authority for any action by the PTA on federal legislation or regulations affecting the health, education, and general welfare of children and youth. The Legislative Program reflects the federal legislative priorities of the PTA.

### \* PTA Website

The website is regularly updated with information about bills pending before Congress, PTA programs, press releases, and background briefs and talking points on each of the issues identified as national priorities, as well as Action Alerts and the weekly newsletter from Washington, This Week in Washington.

### \* Learn More:

- What is Lobbying?
- Why Lobby? Ten Reasons
- Say it Well
- What PTAs Can Do Around Elections
- Hosting a Candidates Forum
- PTA Voter Guide

### \* E-Learning

One of the tools National PTA provides to help you advocate for your children and schools is an easy online e-Learning course, Effective Advocacy for Your Child.