

WISCONSIN PUBLIC EDUCATION NETWORK RK

TIPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

Why relationships matter

- **Gets their attention** *It's harder to ignore someone you know.*
- **Makes it personal** *It's harder to ignore someone you care about.*
- **Builds credibility** *It's harder to ignore someone you know has done their homework.*
- **Makes it real/local** *It's harder to ignore someone who reminds you of home.*

How to build a relationship with your elected officials (and other decision-makers)

- **Share your story** *Let them know why you are driven to advocate for kids & schools.*
- **Make it personal** *Use concrete, specific examples from your community & your experience.*
- **Don't take it personally** *Be persistent. They learn new names each day. Be someone to remember.*
- **Listen to learn** *Your legislator has a story, too. Find out what it is, and make a connection.*
- **Paint the picture** *Bring visuals (handouts with photos are ideal), share videos, show pictures*
- **Get to the heart** *Relationships are built at the level of emotions and shared values.*
- **Be yourself** *Be honest & let your passion shine. Your story matters – show them why!*
- **Be brave** *Don't be intimidated. Elected officials work for us, but democracy depends on you!*

"The most important political office is that of the private citizen."

– Justice Louis Brandeis

Ways to reach your legislator

- **Visits - in person, face to face.**
 - **Go to them:**
 - Office visits
 - Attend listening sessions or other forums
 - **Invite them to come to you:**
 - **Host** a listening session or forum/panel/public speaking event
 - Invite to one of your group's meetings
 - Invite to a kitchen table/living room event with a small group
- **Testify! (then amplify!)**
 - In-person testimony at hearings is especially effective when you already have a relationship with your legislator.
 - Written testimony carries more clout when they know you
 - Always SHARE your testimony with a wider audience (publish written testimony, share video of verbal testimony) so that the people where you live know you spoke out, and know your concerns
- **Phone (calls to office)**
 - You'll usually get staff. Be prepared to state your concerns quickly and coherently.
 - Always leave contact info
- **Email.**
 - Follow all conventions of formal letter-writing when contacting legislators by email.

The Wisconsin Public Education Network is a project of the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES) 501(c)(3). To support local level action with statewide impact, send contributions payable to WAES to: PO Box 6592, Monona, WI 53716-0592, or make a one-time or monthly donation using the DONATE button at: WisconsinNetwork.org. For more info, contact Heather DuBois Bourenane hdb@WisconsinNetwork.org or (608) 572-1696.

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- Keep in mind that responses might be coming from an aide or staffer
- Cite your sources; avoid long rants. Short, clear paragraphs are best.
- If you have questions, make them clear.
- **Through staff.**
 - Building relationships with staffers is critical.
 - Know their names, be courteous.
 - Be sure staff notes your name & contact info when taking messages.
 - Follow-up as needed.
 - Thank staff after visits for their help.
- **Petitions.** Impersonal and not effective without follow-up. Do not expect response. Can be an effective tool for reaching others, but not the most effective way to build a relationship with decision-makers.
- **Snail mail.** Written letters can be effective as they grow more rare.
 - Written thank you notes are especially appreciated as follow-up to in-person visits.
- **Social media.**
 - Can be effective, or dangerous. RULE #1: CIVILITY IS EVERYTHING. You can damage your credibility with decision-makers by being cavalier, insulting, or disrespectful on social media platforms.
 - Use “tagging” strategically. Applaud when applause is warranted, but avoid public critiques that serve no purpose other than to disparage.
 - Focus on the issues, not the person, or you lose focus and it becomes personal. This undermines your cause and is a distraction from your goal.
- **Print media**
 - Your letters to the editor of the local paper matter. Share them.
 - Ditto for op-eds
 - Press releases are an especially effective tool

GENERAL TIPS

- **Make your motives/reasons for setting up the visit/event clear** in your ask. Provide a brief introduction to yourself/your group. Include the names of people who will be joining you for the meeting, and how much time you need.
- **Be respectful** of both the office and the person. Use appropriate titles when addressing legislators (especially in emails/invitations).
- Remember: **Legislators are people, too.** Find ways to connect and get to know each other. This will help them remember you, but also help you develop a real relationship that is not just based on what you want from them, or what they want from you.
- **Don't be intimidated.** You are an expert: no one knows more than you do about your story. Democracy depends on your engagement with your elected officials. Take your own role seriously & be proud of it.
- Make a formal **introduction** at the event. Research and read the bio. Give credit for achievements.
- Always have **name tags**/table tents ready for invited guests at events. TAKE A PICTURE OF THE LABELED, EMPTY SEAT if someone doesn't show up. Be sure to let the audience now you invited all candidates/ reps.
- During **campaign** season, be sure to make clear whether or not your group plans to endorse a candidate, and whether the candidate is allowed to bring promotional materials to, or solicit funds at, the event.
- **Always thank them for their service and their time.**

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