

A PEATC

Do You Know....



Fact Sheet for Virginia's Parents Your Voice Counts: Advocating for Policy Change

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy can be defined in many ways. It generally refers to a **person who supports a cause or a policy and makes recommendations to people in authority who can make the change.** Advocacy can be formal or informal. It can be in person, by email/mail, on the telephone, through a petition, at a public hearing, a rally, at a chance meeting, or through social media. The **principles of advocacy are the same** whether you are advocating for changes in special education or on other issues that are important to you. **Your opinion and your story count. They can and do make a difference.** But you have to be patient. **Change takes time**, sometimes years—but it does happen with effective advocacy!

Telling Your Story

Personal stories are a powerful form of advocacy. Policymakers are more likely to care about the impact of a policy or program when they hear your story. Personal advocacy is often more effective than organizational advocacy.

- Personal stories introduce you and your family and help policymakers connect with your personal situation.
- Your story helps policymakers relate to your concerns and see the issue from a new perspective. Stories puts a face to the problem and makes it real.
- Stories allow you to tell policymakers how a law, regulation, policy, program, or budget action affects you and your family and why change is needed.
- There is power in numbers. Refer to the shared concern of others and see if others are willing to tell their stories.
- You can include your personal story in public testimony or if conducting individual advocacy, as an introduction to your child or family.
- Tailor your story to the specific audience and situation. You may have 30 minutes in a meeting, but only 3 minutes to present testimony.
- Effective stories include the Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? If possible, include data and statistics that strengthen your point.

Resources for Effective Advocacy

National Parent Teacher Association
Advocacy Toolkit
<https://www.pta.org/home/advocacy/advocacy-resources/Advocacy-Toolkit>

American Association of University Women
Advocacy Toolkit
<https://www.aauw.org/resources/policy/advocacy-toolkit/>

PACER Center
Be your Own Best Advocate
<https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/wp-c116.pdf>

Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities
Tell Your Story App
<https://mohrmn.org/advocacy/telling-your-story>

West Virginia University Center for Excellence in Disabilities
Types of Advocacy
<http://cedwvu.org/resources/types-of-advocacy/>

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Tips for Meeting with Policymakers

- If you are meeting with a legislator, **try to schedule a meeting in the off session** when it will be less busy. **Do not turn down a visit with an aide!** Often, those meetings can be the most productive.
- **Be specific about the meeting purpose**—the issue you want to discuss, a bill number, who you are or what organization you represent. **Consider bringing people that are also affected by the issue.** Let the office know who is coming.
- **Know the law, policy, program about which you are advocating.** Learn about your elected officials' position on the issue. **Be familiar with both sides of the issue** and arm yourself with information and data that support your position. Bring talking points and decide in advance who will present them
- If you are bringing up a problem, **state what needs to change and recommend potential solutions** that are actionable. Offer to be a resource on the issue. **Be respectful. Never argue or raise your voice.**
- **Provide local context.** Elected officials often prioritize issues that directly affect their constituents.
- **Be clear and specific as to your "ask."** Are you asking for a vote for or against a policy or bill? Sponsorship of a bill? Signing a pledge? Conducting a study?
- **Prepare concise materials (1-2 pages)** that support your position and leave them with the policymaker or aide.
- **Listen carefully to the legislator's response.** What are they conveying directly or indirectly? What are their questions or concerns?
- If you do not know the answer to a question, say you will find out! **NEVER MAKE SOMETHING UP.** You will lose credibility; the policymaker will not trust you and your ability to influence him/her will disappear.
- After the meeting, **compare notes** with anyone who came with you to see if you are on the same page as to what was agreed to.
- **Send a thank you letter that gently reminds the policymaker what he or she agreed to.** Include any follow-up materials that were requested.

Types of Advocacy

Self-advocacy refers to your ability to **effectively assert your own interests, needs, and rights.** You are speaking up for yourself. To be good self-advocate you need to understand your rights and responsibilities, understand your strengths, and needs, and be able to communicate your needs and decisions.

Individual Advocacy occurs when you **help someone else or they help you.** For example, if you help someone at an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting or bring someone to help you, that is individual advocacy. Some organization hire a person to advocate for their interests or the interests of another. That can be individual or systemic advocacy.

Systemic Advocacy is when you and/or other like-minded individuals **work to influence decision-makers in order to change laws, regulations, policies, or practices.** It can be done at the local, state, or national level. **This fact sheet focuses on systemic advocacy.**

PEATC's mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia's children by working collaboratively with families, schools and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.

For more information about us, please contact:

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