



## Letter-Writing Events and Tables

[www.parentsunited.org](http://www.parentsunited.org)

You don't have to write letters alone! Recruit parents from your school and community to participate in a letter-writing event.

Letter-writing events can be held in your school, home, local library, community center, coffee shop or other public meeting space. Whether you envision your event as a party, or a casual gathering of family and friends, or a call to action for your school community, this guide will help you quickly take care of the basics so that you can focus your energy on your guests.

### Why write letters to elected officials?

Handwritten letters not only demonstrate the importance of the issue to your community, but they also give "ammunition" to legislators who support your cause.

### Why organize a group of letter writers?

The advantages of writing letters together as a group are simple: more people means more motivation, more fun, more letters, and more impact. The group setting also provides an opportunity for discussion and the planning of future events. What's more, letter-writing events combine education about an issue with action. By hosting the event, your guests learn more about the issues and the actions they can take. This can be an energizing first step to learning how to participate in our democracy.

### Where to Start

#### Step 1. Define Your Purpose

Decide Who to Contact  
(see [www.parentsunited.org/Who](http://www.parentsunited.org/Who))

Decide What to Say  
(see [www.parentsunited.org/Key](http://www.parentsunited.org/Key))

Put together a sheet of "Talking Points" tailored to your group or use these two questions to help your group define the local impacts:

- What have we lost?
- What are we afraid of losing?

Ask your principal to prepare information. Allow at least 10-20 minutes for this discussion on your agenda.

#### Step 2. Set Your Agenda

An effective, trouble-free event is best achieved by taking the time to draw up a program ahead of time, writing down what you want to say and do. Here's an outline of a sample program and a description of each item:

##### 1. Check-In

Collect the names, addresses and e-mail addresses for future activities and hand out your supplies as people arrive.

##### 2. Welcome and Introductions

Thank your guests for coming. Make

sure everyone knows your name and the names of the other guests. Tell your group why you support or oppose the proposed legislation (if appropriate) and what motivated you to organize an event. Be sure to mention that your event is connected to a campaign of similar events taking place across the state.

##### 3. Briefing About the Issue

Provide information about:

- > The issue
- > Local impacts
- > Current legislation

##### 4. Instructions and Goal Setting

Set a goal for the group (for example, 50 letters; 10 letters per person). Then, explain the steps to meet that goal. Go through the packet of materials so that everyone knows what they have. Point out the pieces you think will be most helpful. Ask if there are questions and answer any in front of the whole group.

##### 5. Write Letters

Sit down with the group and begin writing. Group conversation will probably come naturally, but it is fine to get it rolling yourself. More questions are bound to come up. Let the entire group know about

each new question and the answer since others may be thinking the same questions. Don't forget to take a few pictures to capture the event.

##### 6. Wrap Things Up

Near the end of your scheduled time ask everyone to finish the letter they are working on. Make sure all letters are addressed, sealed and stamped, then tally them up. In all likelihood, you'll have met your goal and can celebrate. If they choose, let guests take extra letter-writing materials home to do more. Finally, encourage the group to make a commitment to take future actions, such as: hosting letter-writing events of their own, calling their state senators and representative, and writing letters to the editor. Be sure to thank your attendees for their efforts and invite them to another event or to join your group.

#### Step 3. Pick a Time, Date and Location for the Event

Place a premium on table space. Each letter writer will need a solid, clean surface to work on. Equally important, the location should allow you to easily communicate with your group. Try to avoid places that are noisy or that would

force your guests to sit far apart from each other.

#### Step 4. Recruit an "Expert"

It helps to have someone at your event who can educate your group about the issues (help you with the briefing). This could be someone from your group or an "expert," such as your school principal, a representative from your school district, a Parents United representative or school lobbyist.

If you're planning to hold your letter-writing event at your school, it's a good idea to recruit your school principal to support the effort. A good letter describes local impacts, and some principals are more comfortable than others letting the community know about how the issues are affecting your school. Knowing they have your support will help your principal be more comfortable with the prospect of taking the heat.

#### Step 5. Send Out Invitations

Invite about twice as many people as you hope will show up. Be prepared for a few friends to cancel at the last minute. Frequent communication will help you draw the biggest crowd. For many, an e-mail invitation is the first

step. Follow-up with a phone call to those who don't respond to the invitation within a few days. (This is a good time to use your phone tree.) A day before your event give a quick e-mail reminder and phone call to those that have RSVP'd.

#### Step 6. Collect Letter-Writing Supplies

Pens, paper, envelopes, postage stamps or pre-stamped postcards; and supplies for children's activities if you plan to provide childcare or include children in your letter-writing effort.

#### Step 7. Put Together a Packet of Handouts

This might include:

- A brochure or fact sheet describing your group
- Sample letters (It's best if you write your own.)
- Contact information for letter recipients
- Background information

Some options for pulling together background information are:

- Cut and paste information from [www.parentsunited.org](http://www.parentsunited.org) or [www.parentsunitednetwork.org](http://www.parentsunitednetwork.org) to create background materials suited

to your community or E-mail either organization with specific questions.

- Hand out "Setting the Record Straight About Minnesota School Finances" prepared by the Alliance for Student Achievement (available at [www.parentsunited.org/tools2](http://www.parentsunited.org/tools2))
- Develop a one-page fact sheet describing the local impacts of the larger issue.
- Prepare brief summaries of current legislation (see [www.parentsunited.org/Know](http://www.parentsunited.org/Know))

Make certain that you have enough to keep everyone busy and involved. Prior to your event, organize the materials into individual packets for every guest so that less time is lost shuffling and passing paper.

#### Step 8. Follow Up

Hold your elected officials accountable. Send a thank you letter to legislators who vote for the bill(s) you support. When your elected official votes the correct way on an issue, send a letter to the editor of your local paper praising his or her vote. Send a letter expressing your group's concern to elected officials who vote against the proposal.

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## Tell Your Story

(an easy-to-use outline for writing letters)

The community, legislators, school board members and other decision-makers need to hear about what's happening in your school!

Here's a quick outline that can help you tell your story in a clear and concise way. When you tell your story, speak (or write) from your heart!

### 1. Introduce your story

(2-3 sentences). Set the stage for your story by providing:

- Your full name (even if you've been introduced)
- City or town of residence; and
- Name and ages of the people in your story

Then state your main message. This tells them why you are about to tell them this story!

### 2. Tell your story – CHALLENGE, ACTION, RESULT (4-8 sentences)

- Explain the **CHALLENGE** that you face
- Explain the **ACTION** that would help you address that challenge
- Tell what kind of **RESULT** could be achieved due to the action

### 3. Wrap it up!

- (3-5 sentences)
- Tell how your result would benefit other families, the community, and the state.
- State your main message again.
- Tell them what you want them to do about it.
- Say thank you!

## Letter-Writing Tables

Set up a table during conferences, or at a meeting or event, to spur people to sit down and write.

### What You Will Need

- A table with chairs and space to write
- Letter-writing supplies—pens, paper and envelopes or prepaid postcards (consider offering to mail the letters v. providing stamps which might "get lost" in the shuffle)
- Background information, sample letters, and contact information for letter recipients
- Bill numbers and brief summaries, if appropriate

Decide what you will provide at the table and what you will provide as handouts for people to take home. Consider adding a 3-ring binder with handouts from

previous events or other sources, previously sent letters or personal statements from members of your community.

### Promote Your Table

- Let people know about the letter-writing table in advance through E-Alerts, newsletters, announcements and signs at the door.
- Put together a display that outlines the issues and local impacts (the display boards kids use for science projects work well).

### Staff Your Table

Have someone on hand to answer questions and help people understand what to do. Consider "seeding" the table with a few people—nothing draws like a crowd!