



Write a Letter to Your Legislator

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Never underestimate the power of a letter, especially a letter (or e-mail or fax) to your very own legislator!

Contrary to popular opinion, the average legislator is not being flooded with mail from his or her constituents. In fact, the average legislator may be feeling downright lonely when it comes to mail. As one retired state senator told a group of citizens, "In the legislature, ten letters from people in your district is considered a big deal. Twenty letters is considered a tidal wave. And if you get 50 letters, you think there's a huge problem out there. I don't think the average citizen understands that."

So keep those cards, letters and e-mails flowing, but do try to make them personal. Legislators react to form letters and spam . . . well, the same way the rest of us do. They simply toss it in the trash or hit delete.

But a letter or e-mail, written by a real person, addressed individually to them and talking about issues in their district, will get their attention and can make a difference.

You can write to a legislator to voice support for or opposition to a piece of legislation, inform them of a problem in your community, share your expertise or knowledge, or thank them for their vote on a certain measure.

Use the correct address and salutation, e.g. Dear Senator [last name], or Dear Representative [last name], or Dear Governor [last name]. Be sure to correctly spell the legislator's name and use the correct address!

Type or write your letter clearly. If they can't read it, you've just wasted your time. And your time is really valuable—as is theirs. Note: handwritten letters are every bit as effective as typed letters (if not more so).

Always include your return address. Write on personal or business stationary if possible; or type your name and address on the letter, not just on the envelope. Make sure your zip code appears on the letter. It lets your legislators know that you live in their district.

Because all politics is local, if you live in the legislator's home district, you're hot political property. If you don't live in their district . . . well, it's sort of like being the bridesmaid instead of the bride. If you can't vote for them—or against them—you just don't matter as much. As a result, they may or may not respond to you. Don't take it personally. Instead, find friends, relatives or fellow parents who DO live in these legislators' districts and get them to write letters.

Of course, if you're writing to a legislator on a key committee, the House Speaker, Majority Leader, or the governor, remind them that they are representing not just the families in their own district, but the children and schools throughout the state.

Be direct. Be brief. State your purpose in the first paragraph. Keep your letters short and to the point. Ask for what you want. Make only one or two points. Explain why the issue is important to you, but stay focused! A long laundry list of concerns will just lose a legislator's attention, so keep your letter down to one page, two max.

Be decent. Be fair. Not just because your mom would prefer it, but also because it's more politically effective. Legislators respond to insults, threats and sarcasm the same way you do. They get defensive and stop listening, and we want these folks to listen!

Be specific. Be informative. Put your thoughts in your own words. Use personal experiences to support your key points. Any time you can give a real-life example of how the issue affects your schools or your children, please do it. Legislators spend a whole lot of time in endless meetings. Be their eyes and ears. Tell them what's going on in the schools.

Be timely. In politics, timing is everything! Contact your legislator while there is still time for him or her to act. Respond quickly to legislative alerts from the your organization or coalition.

Be a persistent, polite pest. Don't be satisfied with a generic response that gives a status report on the bill, promises to "keep your views in mind" or otherwise skirts the issue. That means you've just been politely blown off. Write back and ask for a more specific response—

this will show that you are listening and holding them accountable. This makes you a far more serious player than most folks who write one letter and then disappear.

Even if your legislators consistently vote against your views, let them know you're aware of their voting record and explain why you think they should have decided differently. In the long run, you—and your fellow parents—just might change their minds.

Say thanks. Legislators usually don't get much gratitude, so thanking legislators for their hard work and long hours makes you stand out in the crowd. We all do better when someone notices our hard work.

Be sure to sign your letter!

Letters About a Specific Bill or Policy

If you are writing about a specific bill or policy, be sure to:

- Write at the proper time, when a bill is about to be discussed in committee or on the floor.
- Cite the bill by number or the policy by name. You can look this up at www.parentsunited.org/Know or call the House Index at (651) 296-6646.
- State your position (whether you are for or against the bill or policy) and why you hold that position.
- Be honest and speak from your own experiences and your own perspective. If you have expert knowledge or wide experience in particular areas, share it with the member. But don't pretend to wield vast political influence or expertise you don't really have.
- Be factual and constructive. If you are writing to oppose legislation, indicate specific adverse consequences and suggest better alternatives.
- If possible, include copies of pertinent articles and editorials from local newspapers.
- Ask for a response back with the legislator's position and his or her views on the issue or bill, but don't demand a commitment before all the facts are in. Bills rarely become law in the same form as they are introduced.

Letters as a Relationship-Building Tool

Letters can be a good way to introduce yourself and establish a relationship with your legislators. In your letters, you can:

- Make reference to past meetings, mutual acquaintances, or other community connections.
- Be appreciative. Write to your legislator when he or she does something you approve of. A note of appreciation will really stand out.
- Offer yourself as a resource on local education issues, and encourage your legislators to contact you with questions.

Providing something in writing helps legislators remember who you are and what your organization does for the community. A good way to keep them up-to-date is to add them to your school or organization mailing list for periodic newsletters.

Letters provide a good introduction. Follow up with a phone call or visit; or better yet, invite your legislators to visit your schools.