



PARENTS UNITED
FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SEE KIDS AGAIN

Meet Your Legislators

www.parentsunited.org

One-on-one meetings with your elected officials and their key staff aides are a very useful way to get to know them and communicate your views on important issues. As busy as they are, elected officials usually try to find time to meet with their constituents. Taking the time to meet with your legislators before you need their assistance puts you in a better position to ask for help down the road. Here are a few tips for having an effective personal meeting with elected officials.

Where to Start: Set up the meeting and keep it

Make an appointment. Elected officials can be visited on the job at the State Capitol, in their local offices, or whenever they are engaged in public business.

Arrange a meeting ahead of time by contacting the legislator's local or state office staff person in charge of scheduling. (Never call the legislator directly just to schedule an appointment.)

Identify yourself as a constituent, explain the purpose of the meeting and describe who will attend. Possibly send an introductory letter. (see www.parentsunited.org/Key)

If you can't get an appointment, send information.

Meetings at home. Schedule one-on-one or group meetings with legislators in your local community, or invite your legislators to community and school-based events.

Many Minnesota legislators also schedule regular "Town Meetings" with their constituents.

Keep your delegation small. Provide names and affiliations of delegation visitors in advance.

Be on time and be flexible. Don't be late. Your legislators are very busy and may skip the meeting altogether if you're running late. If you do get stuck and know you'll be late, call the legislator's office and let staff know when you expect to arrive. They'll try their best to accommodate you, if you give them a little warning. On the other hand, you may be kept waiting or your meeting may be interrupted. Sometimes you may have to conduct your business while you walk with your elected official to a committee meeting.

Don't be disappointed if you meet with staff instead of your elected official. Last minute changes may force a legislator to ask that you meet with staff. Don't be too upset if that happens! Remember, staff are important allies when connecting with elected officials. They will always advise the legislator of your concerns. A meeting with the right staff person can be just as important as meeting personally with the elected official—sometimes more so. Some staff members are very influential and should be briefed separately.

Always remember to say thank you. No matter how you feel about how the meeting went, always send a note

thanking the legislator for the meeting. This is also an opportunity to mention any points you may have forgotten or to send follow-up information that you promised.

If you met with a staff person (not the legislator), send a thank you letter to the staff member and a separate letter summarizing your meeting to the legislator.

Never just "drop by" the office and expect to have a meeting. While legislative offices will always try to accommodate constituents, it can be a major hassle for them if you drop by unannounced and want to meet with the elected official. You may end up pulling them out of an important Committee hearing, interrupting a staff meeting or some other critical activity. They'll remember you, but not necessarily in the way you want.

If you do stop by a legislator's office and he or she is tied up, leave a personal note.

Now that you have a meeting set up, how do you present your case?

Focus your message. Be brief. Chances are that you will have a very limited amount of time (20-30 minutes), so it's very important to be prepared and able to express your views quickly and clearly. Make a short list of the key points you want to make.

State your purpose. Begin by thanking the legislator for taking time to meet with you, followed by a clear statement of purpose and introductions. Make it clear who you are and why you have asked for the meeting. Be straightforward in your presentation.

Tell your own story. Talk about how the issue affects you, your children, your schools and your community. It can be hard for elected officials to have a clear picture of how their votes actually end up affecting their constituents, especially if they don't have kids in public schools. Tell one or two short stories to illustrate how their choices will impact the lives of the children and families in their district.

Bring written materials. Be "businesslike" in your presentation. Use pictures, graphs and other visual aids, if appropriate. It's always helpful to have a one-page fact

sheet, position paper, brochure or other materials you can leave behind. This is also a prime time to deliver letters written by other parents at your school which can provide your legislator with "ammunition" to support your position.

If the issue is complicated, say so, and leave behind something in writing that explains the problem and solutions more completely.

Ask for what you want. Tell your legislator what action you would like for him or her to take to address your concerns. Ask your legislator:

- If she or he will be present for the vote
- To give you his or her position on the issue
- To refer you to others concerned about your same issues
- For suggestions about what you can do to promote the desired result

Don't assume an initial positive response means a supportive vote.

Know the opposition. Know who may oppose you and why. Give anticipated arguments and rebut them individually. Be prepared to defend your position with facts.

If there's strong opposition or the issues are complex, briefly state your case during the meeting and leave a written summary. Do not try to make your legislator an expert on a complex topic in 10 minutes.

Offer to be a local resource. Legislators will always welcome a constituent who is knowledgeable on specific issues and is willing to be a local resource. Meetings with legislators should be informative. Let the legislator know how the issue relates to local constituents—what your request will accomplish for you and your community. Make sure that you leave your contact information with your legislators.

Be inclusive. State policies are intended to have broad impact and can affect different constituents in many different ways—students, parents, teachers, other educators, employers, etc. Keep your focus on the students. Even when you talk about something as specific, such as teacher quality or pay for performance, keep the focus on what is in the best interest the students in your community and for all Minnesota students.

You don't have to know all the answers. Don't bluff. If you don't know the answer to a question, admit it. Tell your legislator that you'll follow up and get back to him or her with the information ... and then do!

What do you do if there's a bill involved?

- Research the process. Know how bills move through the committees, the timeline and who makes the decisions. Don't ask the legislator to educate you.
- Start your visit by immediately informing the legislator of the purpose of the visit, the size and extent of the organization you represent and the bill at issue, including Senate/House file numbers, authors, status, and when the bill is expected to come before the legislator.
- Provide a summary of the bill in writing as well as a summary of points to discuss. Be brief. No more than one page.
- Inform the legislator of your position on the bill and supporting reasons.

What do you do if there isn't a bill?

- Explain the need for a bill. Describe what's happening in your schools and your community that's causing enough concerns for you to even ask for a meeting.
- Create a list of the problems and possible solutions.
- Create a list of desired outcomes, in the best of all possible worlds, what do you want to see happen?

Making the lists will help you focus your thoughts and your message. You may want to provide them in writing, although if you do, keep them short.

What do you do if you and your legislator disagree?

- Don't argue and don't burn bridges. If you don't agree on an issue, present your case in a straightforward, friendly manner and be done. You can always follow up on points of disagreement with a letter explaining your views in further detail.
- Don't take it personally or lose hope. A non-supporter today can be a supporter tomorrow. Go home, rally the troops and forge ahead.
- Don't let yourself get pulled into conversations about "we versus them" (rural, suburban, urban schools). This is about Minnesota's constitutional mandate to educate *ALL* Minnesota children.

Top Tips for the Especially Tacky

Do have a sense of humor ...

Don't begin your meeting by saying that:

- You voted for her/him
- You worked on his/her campaign
- You know a mutual friend and are entitled to special consideration

Don't ...

- Brag about political influence
- Talk about campaign contributions, or
- Offer promises of money, gifts or support

Don't ...

- Attempt a first contact by offering to buy lunch
- Talk endlessly
- Be condescending
- Badger, pester or pressure a legislator
- Abuse a "chance" meeting, or schedule another meeting just to thank the legislator for help on an issue.

Do ...

Assume the best of elected officials. They are there for the public good.