

How to Plan and Execute a Successful Legislative Visit

Set up the meeting

Determine who to contact. You can determine your legislators by visiting <http://www.legis.state.pa.us> and entering the address of your school. You will be directed to a brief biography and contact information for the legislators in your district. It's often more convenient for you to visit the legislator's district office, but if you prefer, you can visit their Harrisburg office. Contact the office where you would like to have your meeting.

- When you call, identify yourself and mention if you are a constituent. Let them know that you would like to speak on issues affecting Pennsylvania's charter schools.
- If the legislator is unavailable, meeting with staff members is also a great opportunity as they play important roles in shaping priorities.
- If meeting with the Senator or Representative, you may be asked to send a written request for the visit. Send a written request, if necessary. The letter needs to include who will be part of the visit and a brief description of why you want to meet with the legislator.

Prepare for the Meeting

First, learn as much as you can about your legislator's background- review his/her biography, learn their party affiliation, committee and subcommittee membership and past record on the issues you will be discussing. Such information can provide insights into the legislator's view of the issues and will demonstrate that you have adequately prepared for the visit.

The most important thing to do is to prepare your message. Your message should define your school's work, explain why it is important, and describe how legislators can help. Prepare 3-5 key points you want to make that reflect your greatest concerns. Include data to back up your arguments, especially state-specific or local data, which will help make your points more compelling. Know your issues well and be familiar with how it affects your students and families!

Prepare a packet of materials for the legislator and their staff. This packet should include your school's mission, information on the programs and services your school provides, and data that backs up your arguments and emphasizes the importance and impact of your work.

Materials to include in your packet:

- Provide a one-page fact sheet about your school, highlighting all the wonderful things your school is doing!
- Position papers and/or fact sheets on the legislation/issue you may be advocating for.
- Your business cards.
- PCPCS is pleased to provide a variety of our publications online readily available for your needs!

Once you are prepared for your meeting, be sure to confirm everything! Double check the date, time, location, and room number.

During the visit

When it is time for your meeting, be punctual and patient- arrive on time but also be prepared to wait. Legislators have busy schedules; a late arrival may mean that you miss your appointment. However, it is also not uncommon for a legislator to be late, or to have a meeting interrupted, due to their hectic schedule.

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Start the meeting by introducing all the attendees and mention the name and location of your school. If you are a constituent, make sure you share this fact with the legislator. Consider including a staff person or parent who can speak to the positive impact the school has had on the lives of children.

State the reason for your visit-deliver your message!

- Concentrate on only a few issues and be organized in the meeting. Use only part of your allotted time to present your issue. This will leave time for you to hear the legislator's thoughts on the subject or to answer any of his or her questions. Share the materials you have compiled in your packet, walking the legislator through the key points.
- Tell your personal story. Sharing how your school and your students are personally affected by an issue is a powerful way to advocate and educate legislators. Stories provide emotional resonance and help demystify complex topics by illustrating how problems affect real people. Wherever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the members of his or her district.

After you present your concerns, make a clear “ask” of your legislator. The “ask” should be clear and specific in describing the action you would like your legislator to take to address the issues you have raised. Offer any assistance you can provide as he or she works to implement your request.

Identify points for follow-up and invite the legislator and staff to visit your school. If the opportunity presents itself, take a picture of the group with the legislator. Please share these with PCPCS! Photos make a great addition to our newsletter and website to encourage other PCPCS members to schedule meetings of their own!

Finally, offer to be a resource to your legislator on any issues that may arise in the future.

Additional tips for communicating with the legislator:

- Address the legislator as “Representative” or “Senator.”
- Put a community face on the issue. Legislators want to represent the best interests of their constituency.
- Be straightforward, but courteous, in expressing your views and be receptive to the legislator's questions and comments.
- Never discuss or make a campaign contribution when meeting with a legislator about a legislative issue.
- If you are asked a question that you can't answer, don't guess. Instead, say that you will look into the question and give the legislator an answer as soon as possible.

Follow-up

Immediately after the visit, you should send a thank you letter and re-emphasize key points you discussed during the meeting. Be sure to provide any additional information you may have promised and send a copy of any pictures taken with the legislator.

Report back to PCPCS. PCPCS is continually prioritizing and strategizing which legislators to visit. By letting us know that you've made a visit, we can better plan our lobbying efforts.