



## A D V O C A C Y   T O O L K I T

*Advocates  
give a voice to  
the issues, people  
and principles  
they care about.*

*Your voice  
can make a  
difference!*

**School districts across New York have made devastating cuts to educational programs as they adjust to rising costs that are outpacing revenue.**

For some districts, that has meant lost jobs and reductions in the number of class sections, sports, extracurricular offerings, after-school clubs and bus runs, enrichment opportunities, early learning programs, advanced courses, student support services, and more. In fact, many schools now face the very real threat of educational insolvency, when they will no longer be able to provide the minimum requirements for students under New York State Education Department guidelines.

Continued reductions are not a viable long-term solution to fiscal challenges when today's students and teachers must meet higher performance standards than those for any previous generation. **This trend of reductions cannot continue without threatening the quality—and equality—of the education available to all students.**

Community advocates must speak up *now*, on behalf of their students and their schools, or risk losing the high level of local public education that they've come to expect. **Thank you for being an advocate who stands up for our schools.**

# How can I make a difference for students?

Concerned citizens often wonder what they can do to help their local students and schools.

**The answer:** Complete one or more of the items on the Advocacy Checklist below. Then encourage friends and family to do the same.

## Advocacy Checklist

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### ➤ Empower yourself

- Choose an issue affecting your local schools and learn about that issue (*Action Step #1*).
- Hone and deliver a “laser talk” to someone about the issue you chose (*Action Step #2*).

### ➤ Advocate with your legislators

- Send a letter or email to local legislators. Use Twitter and Facebook, too. (*Action Step #3*).
- Establish a relationship with legislators’ aides (*Action Step #4*).
- Schedule face-to-face meetings with legislators, and ask them to take a leadership role on your selected issue (*Action Step #5*).
- Invite legislators to special events at schools.
- Ask questions at legislators’ town hall meetings.

### ➤ Advocate through the media

- Write a letter to the editor and send your published letter to local legislators.
- Copy editorials or newspaper articles about your issue and send them to local legislators.

### ➤ Advocate in the community

- Organize a letter-writing campaign.
- Speak to a local Community group.
- Participate in a forum on your selected issue.
- Use social media to spread the word about what you’re advocating for:
  - Update your Facebook or Twitter status with a key point from your “laser talk.”
  - Share links to relevant news articles or to your school district website.
  - Invite people to participate in events that are related to your selected issue.
  - Follow legislators’ social media accounts. Use social media to connect with legislators.

## How can I have a good discussion with a legislator?

Follow these tips to engage in productive back-and-forth discussions with legislators, even when you don’t agree on the issues.

- **Be brief.** Stick to your key points, and legislators will appreciate your respect for their busy schedules.
- **Be respectful, but also confident and direct.** A thoughtful discussion gives both sides an opportunity to come to an agreement, while a divisive argument makes both sides just want to win. So keep it civil while standing up for your beliefs.
- **Be clear and specific.** Let legislators know exactly what you want them to do (e.g., vote in favor of a bill, sponsor legislation) in a way that requires them to give you a “yes” or “no” response.
- **Be accurate.** Research your issue so you can answer legislators’ questions. Promise to follow up on any question for which you don’t immediately have an answer.
- **Be honest about your concerns.** Paint the real picture of your situation, even if it is scary. Share the ramifications for your community’s schools and children. Use personal or compelling stories and facts.
- **Be timely and persistent.** If an issue has a deadline, make sure you give legislators enough time to respond to the issue. Regular reminders about the importance of the issue from multiple advocates can increase the likelihood that legislators will pay attention to the issue.

# How can I be an advocate for my local schools?

## *Action Step #1*

### **Learn about the key issues we need our legislators to address.**

- The Governor's plan offers a \$1 billion increase in total school aid. This amount falls far short of the \$2.1 billion in total aid the NYS Board of Regents and other statewide educational organizations, including CNYSBA and the Statewide School Finance Consortium, have recommended as needed to simply maintain current services.
- Only \$428 million of this amount is allocated for Foundation Aid, which, is especially vital for our school districts to cover general operating expenses.
- Buried deep in the Governor's budget is complicated new language that would change the existing Foundation Aid formula in a way that threatens the payment of \$4.3 billion still owed to school districts under the 2007 CFE NYS Court of Appeals settlement.

Find out from your Superintendent how these proposals would specifically impact your own district, share them with your state legislators and ask for their support in addressing your district's needs.

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## *Action Step #2*

### **Develop a "laser talk".**

Deliver your messages more effectively by telling gripping stories in brief presentations known as "laser talks."

#### ➤ **Identify the Problem**

In your laser talk, focus first on identifying a problem you want your listener to know about. Try to connect the problem to an issue the listener already cares about.

#### ➤ **Present a Solution**

Next, inform the listener about a solution to the problem you just presented. Give examples of how the solution would work and why it would be effective. You might cite a recent study or use other credible statistics.

#### ➤ **Issue a call to Action**

The final section of the laser talk is the call to action. Calls to action should be concrete, specific and include a "yes" or "no" question.

#### ➤ **Work in a personal story**

Try to include a compelling, personal story that expands on your laser talk.

## *Action Step #3*

### **Write letters and email messages to your legislators...many also have Twitter and Facebook accounts—use them too.**

Legislators often report that their inaction on an issue is simply because not enough people contacted them about it. Sending a message is a simple way to ensure your legislators know how you want to be represented. When writing:

- Include the same points that you refined in your laser talk. The message should include an introduction, problem statement, proposed solution, conclusion and call to action.
  - Keep your message short; a single page is best.
  - Be concise and specific, but add a personal touch.
  - Twitter and Facebook messages can also be effective because they are also available to a wider audience and allow for more frequent communications.
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## *Action Step #4*

### **Develop a relationship with your legislators' aides.**

Sometimes knowing legislators' aides can be just as valuable as knowing the legislators. Aides often have a great deal of influence on the assembly members and senators for whom they work as well as more time to devote to your concerns. Try to build great relationships with these essential staff members.

## *Action Step #5*

### **Meet face to face with your legislators.**

Ideally, your first meeting with a legislator should be before a problem arises. It's also best to schedule a personal meeting in a legislator's local district office. Keep in mind these additional tips for an effective meeting:

- **Be on time.** Legislators have full schedules and may not be available if you arrive late.
  - **Be concise.** Stick to your message, and expect no more than 15 minutes for a meeting.
  - **Be flexible.** If your legislator is late or can't attend, convey the same message you had planned to deliver to the legislator's aide.
  - **Be pleasant and appreciative.** Niceness and a bit of humor can make your visit memorable.
  - **Be passionate, not emotional.** Emotional pleas often make others uncomfortable.
  - **Be prepared.** Make sure you understand the arguments in opposition to your issue and have talking points prepared to combat them. Answer any questions your legislator may have and promise to follow up if you don't immediately have an answer available. Have some materials that are relevant to your issue to leave behind.
  - **Be personal—about your issue.** Speak with passion about local children, local jobs, the local economy, local taxes, etc.
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SCHOOL DISTRICT	SENATE DISTRICT	ASSEMBLY DISTRICT
APW	48	120
Auburn	50, 51, 54	126
Baldwinsville	50	129
Candor	51, 52	124
Cato-Meridian	48, 50, 54	130
Cazenovia	53	121
Central Square	47, 48, 50, 53	117, 120, 130
Chittenango	50, 53	121
Cincinnatus	51, 52	122, 126
Cortland	51	125
DeRuyter	51, 53	121, 126
Dryden	51, 52	124, 125
East Syr-Minoa	50, 53	127, 128
Fabius-Pompey	51, 53	127
F <sup>r</sup> ville-Mantius	50, 53	127
Fulton	48	120
Groton	51, 54	125
Hannibal	48, 54	130
Homer	50, 51, 53	126
Ithaca	51, 52, 54, 58	124, 125
Jamesville-DeWitt	50, 53	127, 128
Jordan-Elbridge	50	126
LaFayette	50, 53	126, 128
Lansing	51, 54	125
Liverpool	50, 53	127, 128
Lyncourt	53	129
Marathon	51, 52	122, 124, 126
Marcellus	50	126
McGraw	51	126
Mexico	48	120
Moravia	50, 51, 54	126
N. Syracuse	50, 53	127
Newfield	51, 58	125
Onondaga	50, 53	128
Oswego City	48, 54	120, 130
Phoenix	48, 50	120
Port Byron	54	126, 130
Skaneateles	50, 51	126
Solvay	50, 53	129
Southern Cayuga	51, 54	126
Syracuse City	50, 53	128, 129
Trumansburg	54, 58	125, 132
Tully	50, 51, 53	127, 126
Union Springs	50, 54	126
Weedsport	50, 54	126
West Genesee	50	126
Westhill	50, 53	129

**Please Note:** Because legislative boundaries don't match, multiple legislators may represent single school districts.

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