

There ought to be a law! That's the first thought that usually occurs to spur an advocate into action. But then what to do? Discover the basics of how to be an effective advocate for early care and education.

Influencing Legislation— Advocacy Basics

Kathy L. Pillow-Price

Early educators aim to provide high-quality services for children and families. Those services are often helped or harmed by the nature of the political climate at any moment. Currently, there are many critical issues affecting the field at both the state and national levels. The power of early childhood's collective voices and the desire to make a difference can lead to change. Professionals can talk with government officials about their concerns and hopes for America's children and families. So much of what needs to be accomplished hinges on political decisions. This article reviews how to be an informed advocate.

How Laws Are Made

First, advocates need a basic understanding of how a bill becomes a law at the federal or state level. Primarily, a bill is simply an idea that someone, or a group of people, would like to see become law. This idea can come from anyone, but only a representative or senator can guide it through the process. When people see a problem that may have a legal solution, they can contact a legislator to help. This is known as advocacy or influencing legislation.

Most representatives do not have a background in education. They need those who know about children and families to inform them about innovations in the profession and possible solutions (NAEYC, 2004). If professionals do not speak up for children and for the field itself, someone else will speak for them. Can early childhood educators risk not speaking up? Can early childhood professionals be assured that others will speak effectively about the needs of children, families, and the

field? Early childhood educators have a wealth of experience to share!

Advocacy in Practice

Advocacy is a political technique for making public officials aware of people's views in the hope that leaders will be influenced to support those viewpoints (Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, 2007). Advocates are resources—to give legislators information and help elected officials understand things. Seasoned advocates have found that the most effective approach is through personal contact.

Advocates build relationships.

Face-to-face meetings are often the most effective political communications. In meetings, advocates establish a relationship with legislators. These meetings may take place at the capital, but many elected representatives are available to meet locally with constituents, especially when lawmakers are not in session. It is always best to schedule an appointment and inform the leader's office about the reason for requesting the meeting (Association of Community College Trustees, 2006).

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What do they mean?

A *bill* is an idea that someone would like to see become law.
Advocacy is efforts to influence legislation.

In most states, social calendars for representatives and senators are on the Internet. Many of these events are free, open to the public, and provide a great opportunity for networking about a cause. Advocates might also meet with a staff member instead of an elected official.

When talking to a legislator, either in person or on the phone, these key tips, adapted from NAEYC's Advocacy Toolkit (2004), may be helpful:

1. **Do research.** If possible refer to bills by number and then describe their content. Craft an initial presentation that is about 2 minutes long. Think in bullets! With a colleague, practice talking points and anticipate questions.
2. Learn what concerns the lawmaker—including any children and family—and relate that information to the issues to make a more **personal presentation.**
3. At the beginning of the call or meeting, identify participants as **voters** in the district if that is the case. Legislative officials tend to listen more carefully to people they represent. If callers are not constituents, briefly explain why it is in the lawmaker's best interest to talk to non-constituents.
4. Be considerate of a leader's time. **Be brief.** Be friendly, hold off on arguments, and be clear about how passage or failure of a bill will help/hurt children or the profession.
5. Be clear that it is important for the lawmaker to **commit to support** (or

Figure 1: Ten Golden Rules of Lobbying

1. **Politics Is Consumer-Driven**
Help your legislator understand why your position is important to his or her constituents. Fight where the legislator lives through grassroots organizations at home.
2. **Do Your Homework**
Know your stuff. Understand your issue, the bill you support or oppose, and the legislative process before you approach your legislator. Know who the players are, who decides what, and which issues are hot at the moment.
3. **Information Is Power**
The secret is the distribution of information to legislators and their constituents. Be prepared to give the legislator information he or she can use, including what you are hearing from other legislators and from people back home.
4. **A Little Professionalism Goes a Long Way**
Be credible, honest, and trustworthy. Never threaten, lie, or conceal facts. Stay calm—if you lose your cool, you lose the case.
5. **Be Positive**
Always make your case without being critical of others' personalities or motives.
6. **There Are No Permanent Friends and No Permanent Enemies**
Do not take your traditional friends for granted. Never write off a legislator just because of party affiliation. Do not make enemies of legislators—you may need them as friends in the future.
7. **Build a Bond, Not a Gap**
Research things you might have in common with the legislator. Use shared values to create easy, friendly, frequent communication with legislators.
8. **Be a Partner**
Build coalitions and look for allies among other organizations. Be accessible to legislators and other lobbyists if they have questions or need follow-up information. Become known as a reliable resource.
9. **Rome Wasn't Built in a Day**
Aim for consensus rather than for a "victory." Be willing to settle for making progress toward your goal, getting the bill passed, and fine-tuning it in future sessions.
10. **Stay Committed**
Remember—you are the expert!! You have a compelling, energizing reason to keep fighting until you get what you need.

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oppose) the specific item. One way to counter excuses is to remind leaders that it is always the right time to do the right thing for children.

6. **Be POLITE.** Build relationships. Remember that even when facing opposition, the same legislator might reconsider his or her stand

in the future. Manners go a long way. Say "thank you" before saying "please," and always part on friendly terms.

7. **Follow up** meetings with a phone call, e-mail, or letter and offer another personal visit or more information.



Photo by
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

Child advocates with the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition line the steps leading to the House Chamber at the Arkansas State Capitol before a pivotal vote on financing health programs. The power of early childhood's collective voices and to desire to make a difference can lead to change. Professionals can talk with government officials about their concerns and hopes for America's children and families. So much of what needs to be accomplished hinges on political decisions.

Other Advocacy Methods

Letters, e-mails, and faxes can be effective advocacy tools if they are well planned (Huddleston, 2007). Other written forms are Facebook pages and Twittering, which many legislators now use to stay in touch with constituents.

Originals are far more effective than mass-produced communications (Caldwell, 2003). As with face-to-face meetings, first identify oneself as a constituent and be concise. Refer to bills by number. Communications should be carefully composed and

Figure 2: Sample Letter to a State Representative

Date

Dear Representative ____ (last name) ____:

I am a registered voter in your district and an educator with 19 years of experience in early childhood. I am also a concerned constituent. The purpose of this letter is to ask you to consider sponsoring, co-sponsoring, or supporting a change in the law that concerns (issue or topic) during the upcoming legislative session. (Use bill number if available.)

If you look at research conducted on (your issue/topic) you will find that... (Briefly and ACCURATELY summarize research in bullet points). You may check these statistics at (include Web site information or quote source).

I believe that the best interests of children should always remain in the forefront of any decisions made by our state legislative body. I believe that it is vital to look after our children in every way. I ask you to use your voice to do everything you can to get this legislation sponsored and passed.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope you will consider benefiting children and families by passing a law such as this. Thank you for your continued service to our great state. I look forward to discussing this issue with you in more detail in the future.

Sincerely,

Your name

free from grammar and spelling errors. Remember that letters may take several days to reach a legislator.

When using e-mail, keep in mind that not all legislators view their e-mail regularly. Therefore, do not depend on e-mail alone for important issues. Sometimes the quickest way to reach leaders is by fax. In many cases, it may be best to try several methods. If possible, all written communication should be followed up with phone calls and/or personal visits.

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When communicating with national representatives or senators, a fax

or phone message may be the best way to get attention. Because of terrorism alerts, regular mail is closely monitored and searched, which slows it down. These offices are inundated with e-mail. Contact both the legislative offices in the home state and in Washington, D.C.

Advocacy Resources

Early Childhood Mentors

Now is the time for early childhood professionals to not only be advocates, but also to mentor advocates and be part of a movement (Nyman, 2003). The profession always needs leadership, experience, and inspiration. With a little support and mentoring, everyone can become early childhood advocates (Arkansas

Advocates for Children and Families, 2007). Successful advocates then encourage others to join the cause and create a larger movement.

To be an effective mentor to others in the profession, start by identifying colleague's skills and potentials. Nurture individuals along by sharing advocacy basics. Help beginner advocates understand that they can make a difference. Show how even little efforts fit into the big picture and result in change. Mentors typically share updates and resources. They encourage relationships with other advocates who are committed to the same goals (Nyman, 2003).

Representatives need to see and feel the passion for children and families! With effective advocates and committed mentors, the potential for positive change in the field of early childhood is great!

Online Advocacy Information

The Advocacy Institute (2002) offers many effective advocacy resources. Some of the best resources are Web sites, where one can access Legislative Action Centers, sign up to be a cyber-lobbyist, learn how and what to write to legislators, learn how to write effective letters to the editor, and also learn some great rules for



Photo by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

A child advocate meets with legislators from Northwest Arkansas during a conference held by the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition. Face-to-face meetings are often the most effective political communications. In meetings, advocates establish a relationship with legislators.

advocating. Some Web sites make it easy to contact national representatives or check on congressional voting records simply by putting in a ZIP code.

Advocates are influential resources.

Table 1 lists a few early childhood organizations that have helpful advocacy information, tools, and tips online. There are a lot more out there! Check the Advocacy or Public

Policy sections on Web sites. Many great sites cover more than early childhood topics, offering general information that is helpful for any legislative issue.

Those who advocate for children serve as a resource to elected decision makers. Advocates work to build relationships and to provide accurate information. They are involved in political decisions that affect the daily lives of children, families, and early childhood professionals. If advocates act ethically, establish themselves as credible information sources, and pay attention to the informal and formal processes of advocacy, they gain access to leaders and influence legislation.

References

Advocacy Institute. (2002). *Nine questions—A strategic planning tool for advocacy campaigns*. Retrieved September 23, 2006, from <http://www.advocacy.org/pdf/9Questions.pdf>

Table 1. Organizations with helpful online advocacy information

SECA	www.southernearlychildhood.org
NAEYC	www.naeyc.org
Children's Advocacy Institute	www.caichildlaw.org
Children's Defense Fund	www.childrensdefense.org
ACEI	www.acei.org
Pre-K Now	www.preknow.org
NEA	www.nea.org

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Put These Ideas Into Practice!

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Key Tips When Talking to a Legislator

1. Do research. Refer to bills by number. Relate the lawmaker's personal concerns to the issue.
2. Craft a 2-minute presentation. Practice with a colleague.
3. Identify participants who are voters in the district.
4. Remind leaders that it is always the right time to do the right thing for children.
5. Be POLITE. Build relationships.
6. Follow up.



Writing to Legislators

Letters, e-mails, and faxes can be effective advocacy tools if they are well planned. Other written forms are Facebook pages and Twittering, which many legislators now use to stay in touch with constituents. Originals are far more effective than mass-produced communications.

Organizations With Helpful Online Advocacy Information

SECA

www.southernearlychildhood.org

NAEYC

www.naeyc.org

Children's Advocacy Institute

www.caichildlaw.org

Children's Defense Fund

www.childrensdefense.org

ACEI

www.acei.org

Pre-K Now

www.preknow.org

NEA

www.nea.org

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.