

*Presented by the  
Georgia School Boards Association*

# **Building Relationships With Legislators**

**A Resource Manual**



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# Foreword

*Elected boards in every school district in Georgia are charged with the awesome responsibility of making decisions to ensure that the schools are well managed and budgets are balanced. The quality of education for the 1.5 million students who attend Georgia schools is largely dependent on how well those decisions are made. But other decisions made by the Georgia General Assembly also impact your school district and schools across the state. That is why it is critical that school board members— now more than ever before— become active advocates for public education.*

## **Why is your advocacy so important?**

Because you know and understand what is necessary to provide a quality education.  
Because you annually must deal with the difficulties of balancing your local budgets.  
Because in a time when diverse messages are being sent to legislators, your voice representing the best interests of students must be heard. Because legislators must hear the message that having a quality education system is more important than creating the perception of fiscal savings by slicing education budgets and reducing programs— especially when these matters are considered without the benefit of study or input from boards of education as to their value and effect.

## **Will what you do really make a difference?**

Yes, it will! School board members and legislators have one very important factor in common— they are both elected, and often by the same constituents. You are a leader in

your community, especially in education matters, and legislators want to hear the local impact of their decisions– especially from those with whom they share an electoral base.

**The following are two of the most effective ways to influence legislators:**

1. Constituent contact. This is most effective in personal conferences, but letters and phone calls also are effective.
2. News media coverage, including opinion editorials and letters to the editor.

*As a board member you can make a difference. Your position equips you with knowledge of needs and what works, and as an elected official you operate from a powerful base. Georgia's students need your active advocacy.*

## **Six Communication Dos and Don'ts**

### **Do These:**

- ▶ Identify yourself. Make sure the legislator understands who you are and which school district you represent.
- ▶ Be brief. Get to the point quickly, and be specific.
- ▶ Use a local angle. Explaining how a bill will positively or negatively affect the local school district can be very persuasive. Remember that you're not only the legislator's constituent, you're also a fellow elected official.
- ▶ Thank legislators for meeting with you and for their support or consideration, even if they are against you. You may need their vote in the future on another matter.

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- ▶ Choose battles wisely. Decide from the start if an issue is important enough to risk ruining a personal relationship with a legislator or whether you would rather keep the relationship long-term and let the issue go.
- ▶ Establish a reputation for reliability and credibility.

### **Don't Do These:**

- ▶ Don't be rude. Threats, rudeness, or other inappropriate behavior will not help your cause.
- ▶ Don't distort the facts. Present your position honestly and thoughtfully. If you don't know the answer to a legislator's question, say so. Then find the information and call back as soon as possible.
- ▶ Don't assume the legislator or staff member has read or remembers something you sent. Lawmakers and their staffs are inundated with volumes of information. So, if you have something you want read, make it brief. It's also a good idea to give copies to the legislator's aide, who will probably be the one who reviews the submission.
- ▶ Don't break a promise. If you tell the legislator you will get information or that you will do something in exchange for support, follow through.
- ▶ Don't give inaccurate information.
- ▶ Don't cut anyone off from contact. Don't let a legislator consider you an enemy because you disagree. Today's adversary could be tomorrow's ally.

# Top 10 Tips of Effective Lobbying

**Tip 1** Research your legislators' backgrounds, committee assignments, and voting records on education issues. Do their children attend your schools?

**Tip 2** Develop relationships with your legislators by routinely visiting, writing and calling; let them know you are a constituent.

**Tip 3** Don't overdo your lobbying. Only write, call, or visit when you have something to say.

**Tip 4** Invite your legislators to visit your schools. Plan a tour of your school district to showcase successful programs in action.

**Tip 5** Lobby with your real life experience. It's your most persuasive tool; use local examples.

**Tip 6** Set priorities. When everything is important, nothing is important.

**Tip 7** Shore up lobbying allies from your community to demonstrate broad support; collaborate with others.

**Tip 8** Don't forget the media. Getting your message out to the press— letters-to-the editor, news releases, etc.— can influence your legislators and public opinion.

**Tip 9** Always be positive and courteous. In politics, there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies.

**Tip 10** Everyone likes a pat on the back. Remember to thank each of your legislators for jobs well done.

## Top Seven Tips for Meeting With Your Legislators

*Meeting in person with your legislators is the most effective way to make your views known and influence legislation. You can visit your legislators in their offices in Atlanta or back home. In addition to visits, consider inviting your legislators to visit a school in your district to see programs in action!*

**Tip 1** Call ahead for an appointment if possible.

**Tip 2** Be concise and focus on just a few issues or bills. Remember that your legislator may have no understanding of the bill, so be prepared to educate him/her.

**Tip 3** Whenever possible, speak from personal experience. Provide brief examples of how this issue affects your local school district, and therefore the legislator's constituents.

**Tip 4** Ask directly for your legislator's support. If your legislator is supportive, ask him/her to lobby other General Assembly members to support your position. If your legislator disagrees with you, hear him/her out politely, express respectful disappointment, and rebut his/her argument if you have the facts to do so. Be courteous; you'll have other issues to take up in the future.

**Tip 5** Always provide a concise, one-page fact sheet or letter describing your position to be left with your legislator as a reminder of the issues and your visit.

**Tip 6** After the meeting, write a letter to thank your legislator for his or her time and reinforce your position.

**Tip 7** If meeting on a GSBA-supported issue, contact GSBA and let us know how your legislator responded to the issue.

Call (800) 226-1856 or (770) 962-2985.

# Top Six Tips for Calling Legislators

*Phone calls are an effective and fast way to communicate with your legislators, especially when a critical vote is coming up. Phone calls remind legislators that constituents are closely monitoring their votes. Sometimes you will be able to speak directly with your legislators; if not always leave a message and ask for a return call.*

**Tip 1** Ask to speak with your senator or representative, or leave a message with the receptionist. This is one of the many times your carefully nurtured relationship pays dividends!

**Tip 2** Give your name, title and the school board on which you serve.

**Tip 3** Focus on one issue or bill. Whenever possible, identify the bill by number and name.

**Tip 4** Briefly state what position you want your legislator to take on the issue. Be prepared to give a locally based rationale for your position.

**Tip 5** Ask for your member's position on the bill.

**Tip 6** If asked, give your address so that you can receive a written response.

## Top Seven Tips on Writing To Legislators

**Tip 1** Focus on one issue or bill per letter and identify the bill by name and number.

**Tip 2** Express your point of view and explain why your legislator should be supportive. Be brief and courteous.

**Tip 3** Briefly explain the local impact of the legislation. Just the facts.

**Tip 4** Request that your legislator take a specific position on the bill. If you want your legislator to support the bill, you may want to ask him/her to cosponsor it or to vote for its passage.

**Tip 5** Ask for a response from your legislator.

**Tip 6** When writing an individual letter, use your signature and personal letterhead and state that you are a board member. If it is a collective letter written by the board, have the president of the board sign it and put it on the board's letterhead.

**Tip 7** Make sure your return address is on the letter (envelopes often get lost) so that your legislator can respond.

# A Checklist of Quick Communication Tips

- \_\_\_\_\_ Know local needs and impact of legislation on your school district.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Speak up; be heard on issues of concern to you. Your actions and inactions count.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Focus on your legislators.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Know your issues. Check GSBA's Capitol Watch Online ([www.gsba.com](http://www.gsba.com)) on a daily basis during the session to keep abreast of legislative news. You can e-mail your legislator from the Capitol Watch Online site.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Know how much you can ask for.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Be honest in your approach.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Identify and utilize common interests/issues/activities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Your knowledge of issues and the legislative process produces credibility with your legislator; your credibility dictates your legislator's level of response.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Be direct.
  - a. Make specific requests.
  - b. Get specific commitments.
  - c. Follow up: Hold a legislator accountable for his/her commitments.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Be sensitive to your legislator's other political necessities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make yourself a contact point for your legislator within your district.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When e-mailing, use the appropriate etiquette in addressing the legislator. (See page 12 in this booklet.)

# Top 10 Tips for Effective Media

**Tip 1** Stay local. One strong article in your hometown newspaper may be worth ten in the New York Times.

**Tip 2** Keep it focused. You may have many issues to bring to the media, but stick to one at a time or they will all get buried.

**Tip 3** Clip and send your good press. A good article can have a long life. Make sure to send press clippings to your members of Congress, coalition partners, and other decision makers.

**Tip 4** Don't forget your own media outlets. Take advantage of school district newsletters, publications, radio and cable programs to educate and get others involved in your advocacy campaigns.

**Tip 5** Just the facts. Stick to what you know and never exaggerate. Remember, you can always get back to reporters after finding the right answer.

**Tip 6** Don't just say it – show it. A demonstration or real-life testimonial goes a long way to illustrate your point and make it more colorful.

**Tip 7** Build media relationships. Get to know the education reporters and take the time to meet with editorial boards.

**Tip 8** Put media relations in your federal advocacy policy. Media relations should be a year-round function– part of the “official” function of your school district in its federal advocacy role.

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**Tip 9** Appoint a press spokesperson for your school board. This contact person must be fully informed about your advocacy agenda to know what to discuss and what not to discuss. It may be you, and not the school district's press person.

**Tip 10** Take advantage of all the media outlets. Legislators may read newspapers most often, but radio and television have a powerful impact on public opinion and should never be overlooked.

## Writing Letters-to-the-Editor and Opinion Editorials

*Letters-to-the-editor and opinion editorials written by readers (called op-eds) are useful ways to speak out on an issue, respond to an article or editorial, or express your position in your own words. They often are read by members of the General Assembly and can do double-time as a lobbying tool.*

*Concentrate on writing letters-to-the-editor or op-eds for your local newspaper since that will have the greatest impact on legislators. Even a letter or op-ed that does not get published is valuable because it may be considered by a newspaper's editorial board reviewing an issue. Or it may cause the paper to write a story on the topic.*

### Hints for effective letters-to-the-editor and op-eds:

**1 Be brief and focus on one issue.** If the article is too long, the newspaper may edit out some important facts. To get an idea of how long is too long, take a look at your newspaper's opinions page and count the words in an average letter-to-the-editor. The average op-ed is usually longer than a letter-to-the-editor and is between 500 and 750 words.

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**2 For a letter-to-the-editor, refer to a recent event or an article**, which has appeared in the newspaper and includes the article's date and title.

**3 When applicable, close your letter or op-ed by asking readers to contact** their members of the General Assembly or other policymakers about the issue.

**4 Give your address, school district and phone number** so that the newspapers can verify authorship.

**5 Clip your published letter-to-the-editor or op-ed** and mail or fax it to your members of the General Assembly.

## State Offices

### **Governor**

State of Georgia  
State Capitol, Room 203  
Atlanta, Georgia 30334  
(404) 656-1776

### **Lieutenant Governor**

President of the Senate  
State of Georgia  
State Capitol, Room 240  
Atlanta, Georgia 30334  
(404) 656-5030

### **Secretary of State**

State of Georgia  
State Capitol, Room 214  
Atlanta, Georgia 30334  
(404) 656-4585

### **Attorney General**

1300 Capitol Square  
Atlanta, Georgia 30334-1330  
(404) 656-4585

continued...

**State Superintendent of Schools**

2066 Twin Towers East  
Atlanta, GA 30334-5001  
(404) 656-2800

**The Honorable (insert name of State Representative)**

State Representative, District (insert number)  
Georgia House of Representatives  
The Capitol  
Atlanta, GA 30334

The salutation of your letter should read,  
“Dear Representative (insert last name).”

**The Honorable (insert name of State Senator)**

**State Senator, District (insert number)**  
Georgia State Senate  
The Capitol  
Atlanta, GA 30334

The salutation of your letter should read,  
“Dear Senator (insert last name).”

**The President**

The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500

The salutation of your letter should read,  
“Dear Mr. or Madam President.”

**The Honorable (insert U.S. Senator’s name)**

Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The salutation of your letter should read,  
“Dear Senator (insert last name).”

**The Honorable (insert U.S. Representative’s name)**

House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The salutation of your letter should read,  
“Dear Congressman/woman (insert last name).”

# Schedule of the 2007 General Assembly Session

<i><b>Date</b></i>	<i><b>Event</b></i>
<b>January 8</b>	Legislature convenes (House and Senate chambers)
<b>January 15</b>	Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday
<b>From Day 1</b>	House rules take exclusive control of calendar; approval needed for bills to be taken to the floor for a vote.
<b>Day 6</b>	Senate rules take exclusive control of calendar; approval needed for bills to be taken to the floor for a vote.
<b>Day 33</b>	Last day that Senate will take new general bills from either House or Senate for the rest of session
<b>Day 39</b>	Last day that Senate may consider any general bills
<b>Day 40</b>	General Assembly adjourns

By law, the Legislature begins its 40-day session on the second Monday of January. With various stoppages, the session could last past March 31st. The legislators generally meet Monday-Friday with the House and Senate starting at 10 a.m. and various committees meeting in the afternoon.

# Know Your Elected Officials

## YOUR SENATOR

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

District No: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Local Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Atlanta Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

## YOUR REPRESENTATIVE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

District No: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Local Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Atlanta Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

SUNDAY MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY SATURDAY

# JANUARY 2007

*News Year's Day*

General Assembly  
Convenes

*Martin Luther  
King, Jr. Holiday*

Legislative Visit at  
Capitol: Districts  
3, 7, and 12

NSBA FRN Conference

*Have you checked GSBAs Capitol Watch  
Online for it's daily reports?*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

# FEBRUARY 2007

				Legislative Visit at Capitol: Districts 2, 6, and 8 <b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	Legislative Visit at Capitol: Districts 1 and 10 <b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	Georgia Board of Education Meeting <b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	Legislative Visit at Capitol: Districts 13 and 14 <b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>18</b>	<i>President's Day</i> <b>19</b>	Legislative Visit at Capitol: Districts 4 and 5 <b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	Legislative Visit at Capitol: Districts 9 and 11 <b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	See the 2007 GSBA Legislative Priorities at <a href="http://www.gsba.com/advocacy">www.gsba.com/advocacy</a>		

SUNDAY

MONDAY

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

**MARCH 2007**

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Georgia Board of  
Education MeetingGSBA/GSSA Day  
at the Capitol,  
Atlanta*School Board Appreciation Week**St. Patrick's Day*

# APRIL 2007

1	2	3	4	5	6 <i>Good Friday</i>	7
8 <i>Easter</i>	9	10	11	12 Georgia Board of Education Meeting	13 NSBA Conference and Delegate Assembly	14
15 NSBA Conference and Delegate Assembly	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

*Check Capitol Watch Online for  
GSBA's Analysis of Bills.*





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9/06