

Advocacy Toolkit

PA Schools Work provides this Toolkit to make it easier for you to:

Take action in your community

Write and submit an opinion piece to your local newspaper

Contact or meet with legislators and staff

Plan a public event when it is safe to do so again

Use social media for advocacy

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SAMPLE ELEVATOR SPEECH

Pennsylvania's funding system for public schools has been broken for decades. It leaves too many of our students behind.

Pennsylvania ranks 44th in the country in the state's share of funding for public schools.

Because 428 of the 500 school districts are not receiving their adequate share of funding from the state, school districts are forced to rely on local tax revenue in an attempt to make up the difference. That means that poor districts are much worse off.

COVID-19 has worsened these systemic inequities.

We need an historic investment in basic and special education funding, like Governor Wolf's proposed increase of \$1.5 billion, to begin resolving the long-standing school funding crisis.

If members of the General Assembly want to ensure every school they represent has the resources needed, they would support a major investment like this.

SAMPLE TALKING POINTS

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Even before COVID-19, this problem was worsening, as mandated costs beyond school districts' control, like pensions, special education and charter school tuition (which school districts must pay) have increased at rates much higher than what the state has been willing to cover.

Students of color are concentrated in deeply underfunded districts: 50% of PA's Black students and 40% of Latinx students are in the poorest one-fifth of districts. They are disproportionately impacted by Pennsylvania's irrational and inequitable school funding system.

Students in school districts that are able to spend more get better academic results: graduation rates are 20 percentage points higher in the wealthiest districts compared to the poorest (94% vs. 74%) and students in the wealthiest districts score much higher on standardized tests than the poorest, on average.

All students deserve access to:

- Enough teachers to keep class sizes down and make sure students have access to all the academic courses they need for today's world and enough instructional time to learn;
- Quality, up-to-date textbooks, computer technology, lab equipment and other science resources; and
- Other supports to help them learn, such as tutors, school counselors, English as a second language instructors, and libraries.

All that requires money. That is why we need a bold investment from the state, like Governor's Wolf's \$1.5 billion dollars for basic and special education to be distributed equitably across school districts based on student and community needs.

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR AND/OR OP-ED

Tips for writing a letter to the editor or an op-ed:

Every legislative office subscribes to all local newspapers in their districts so a letter to the editor or an op-ed will be read by staff and/or your lawmakers. Your neighbors and other allies are likely to read the letters or op-eds as well. These outlets, as well as their websites, create public awareness and can drive the public discussion.

Tips for Writing Letters:

- Use your own words.
- Only send letters to your local newspaper.
- Letters are typically in response to a specific article that has been published.
- Most newspapers limit letters to 200 - 250 words, but newspapers are more likely to print even shorter letters. As a guide, consider the following breakdown:
 - o Introduction (25-50 words)
 - o Key message(s) (100 words)
 - o Call to Action (50 words)
- Newspapers will provide instructions on how to submit letters on their websites and in their print editions.
- Provide your name, home town and daytime contact information. The paper will contact you to confirm that you wrote the letter.
- Make sure you reference the article you are responding to in the first sentence or paragraph of your letter.

Tips For Writing An Op-ed:

- Op-eds are usually submitted by members of the community who are influencers (i.e. a school superintendent, member of a nonprofit organization, lawmaker) BUT parents, taxpayers and students matter and can write op-eds as well.
- Follow your newspaper's submission guidelines, especially on the word count. Most publications limit op-eds to between 600-750 words.
- The paper's editors may want to edit your hard work. Don't be offended and offer to work with them to make it easier for them to publish your work.

Anatomy of an Op-Ed:

It can be helpful to organize your op-ed into three specific parts: introduction, the main argument/case, and a conclusion that summarizes key points and includes a specific call to action.

Introduction:

Engage editor and ultimately readers with concise introduction of 2-3 paragraphs that explains:

- Topic you're addressing
- Why the larger community should care about this issue
- A transition or "nut" paragraph that summarizes your core messages

The Body:

- Use relevant research/data
- Include local examples, impacts, tie-ins to the data and research
- Bring in expert voices

The Conclusion:

Two pieces:

- A paragraph that ties core arguments together. Do not repeat all data points or research but provide overarching summary.
- A Call to Action - what do you want to happen or want people to do?

Nuts and Bolts:

- Provide your name and, if appropriate, your title. Provide e-mail address and cell phone so that the newspaper can confirm that you wrote and submitted the letter/op-ed.
- Some newspapers will ask the author to submit a head shot. Don't be bashful!
- Wait a day and follow up to make sure letter/op-ed has been received.
- Follow all submission guidelines. Some outlets do not accept attachments and require that text be pasted into the body of an e-mail. Other outlets provide a template on their websites for submissions.

Be prepared for a call from your local legislator or staffer. This is the good news: the lawmaker or a legislative staffer will read your letter and might want to discuss it with you. This is a great opportunity to make your case and to request a visit with the lawmaker and/or his or her staff.

Be prepared for a call from a reporter as well. This, too, is good news: reporters will call only to pursue a potential story and your letter/op-ed will be the starting point.

Here are three links to op-eds that might be helpful:

1. Pa schools are bleeding cash while students receive substandard education ,
<https://www.yorkdispatch.com/story/opinion/contributors/2020/12/29/op-ed-pa-schools-bleeding-cash-while-students-receive-substandard-education/4071629001/>
2. This Budget Season, Lawmakers Have to Put Underserved Students First,
<https://www.penncapital-star.com/commentary/this-budget-season-lawmakers-have-to-put-underserved-students-first-opinion/?fbclid=IwAR0Ty64IUWn1MjnzEtZrUqyujV7gHv63IDDMHbAotnue3DYcHjArcAvFg8>
3. Education's Lost Year,
<https://chaddsfordlive.com/2020/12/14/op-ed-educations-lost-year/?fbclid=IwAR34sT5J0x8RQcGHovZRvZVrTrZoTjkkW6n2sq1XE1XYsdtfKjFF3Qni6R8>

CONTACTING YOUR LEGISLATORS OR THEIR STAFF

Lawmakers and their staff are the most critical audience for any advocacy campaign. Ultimately, five parties drive all decisions regarding education policy and funding in Harrisburg: the governor and each of the four legislative caucuses. Any successful campaign must include sustained outreach to lawmakers in their districts and, when appropriate, visits to their Harrisburg offices. Lawmakers respond to their constituents. Lawmakers are willing to, at the very least, listen to your concerns. Virtually every lawmaker relies on staff for routine matters – such as managing calls and correspondence – and for guidance on key issues. Do not be at all discouraged if you reach out to a House member or Senator and a staffer responds. You can call, write or email lawmakers. You can request a meeting with your lawmakers.

Tips for calling, writing a letter or sending an e-mail:

- Use your own words. Form letters/e-mail are tallied up – but not necessarily read.
- Brevity matters. Lawmakers are inundated with correspondence so be concise.
- Include contact information, including cell phone, so staff can respond during work hours.

Tips for a Legislative visit:

When asking:

- Be specific about your issue: A discussion about broad policy questions/issues is not as compelling as an upcoming vote on a key bill.
- Be flexible on the timing: Education might be your most important issue, but they are besieged with demands from any number of stakeholders.
- If you're bringing allies, tell the scheduler how many people will be attending and, broadly, who will be there. (A meeting with three school superintendents is different than one with 10-12-14 parents and/or advocates.)

For the meeting:

- Be respectful: Tone matters, even if you and the lawmaker disagree.
- Do your homework: Know how your lawmaker has voted on key bills and where they stand on key issues.
- Tell your story: Use your own experiences or other local examples/data.

Afterward:

- Provide a leave-behind: Lawmakers will start a file if you give them a simple one-pager that outlines your key points.
- Make it clear that you want to keep the discussion going.
- Thank the lawmaker for their time and encourage them to reach out if they need any more information.

Finally, make a special point to thank the staffers for arranging the meeting. Assure staff that you will stay in touch and offer to serve as a resource for them if they have any questions.

HOSTING A COMMUNITY/LEGISLATIVE EVENT WHEN IT'S SAFE AGAIN

Inviting lawmakers and their staff or community members to attend or participate in an event is a very effective way to engage and educate lawmakers and their staffers. Successful events require sound planning and strong participation by the host(s). An event with 25-30 parents, taxpayers, influencers, important stakeholders or others will generate traction and attention with lawmakers. Below are general guidelines and specific steps that must be taken to ensure a successful event.

Leading up to an Event:

- Designate an Event Coordinator/Moderator who is responsible for setting the agenda; identifying speakers and setting the ground rules for the event.
- Identify lawmakers from your area who should be invited and work directly with staff to pick the right time to ensure participation.
- Develop and share all materials with speakers to ensure that all parties understand the goals.

Materials include:

- o A detailed agenda
- o A media advisory, news release and distribution plan
- o An invitation list for community leaders

Each event needs to have a coordinator who is responsible for making sure that all the speakers understand in advance the purpose of the event and their comments; the time they will have to speak, and the ground rules for Questions and Answers. The coordinator can also be the official ‘timekeeper’ to keep the event moving along or they can appoint someone for this responsibility. All participants should be asked to arrive at least 30 minutes before the event begins to ensure that everyone understands the goals and the agenda. Sometimes participants must cancel at the last minute. Just be prepared to adjust the schedule and inform the participants and the audience that a speaker cannot make it.

Here is a sample agenda:

Registration, Meet & Greet	Event Coordinator	8:30 AM
Event starts with Introductions & Overview	Event Coordinator	9:00 - 9:10 AM
Statements by invited speakers	Event Coordinator	9:10 - 9:30 AM
Statements from parents, teachers, school officials	Event Coordinator	9:30 - 9:45 AM
Legislators and/or staff comments	Event Coordinator	9:45 - 10:00 AM
Q&A from audience	Event Coordinator	10:00 -10:30 AM
Close/Acknowledgements	Event Coordinator	10:30 AM

SAMPLE MEDIA ADVISORY FOR AN EVENT

(ORGANIZATION LOGO)

MEDIA ADVISORY

CONTACT: NAME, email address
Phone number with area code

Educators, Parents and Lawmakers to Discuss Education Funding at Community Forum

HARRISBURG (February XX, 2021) - Educators, parents and lawmakers are inviting community members to attend a forum to discuss funding challenges confronting school officials in central PA starting at 8:30 a.m. on Thursday, February XXX, 2021, at the John Harris High School in Harrisburg.

The Forum is being hosted by _____. The panel discussion will feature remarks from teachers, administrators, parents and State Rep. _____ and State Sen. _____.

"Our goal is to provide residents with information about school funding in our region and at the state level," said John Doe, Communications Director from _____. "We're pleased that our lawmakers can be on hand to help provide their insights about the upcoming budget process. This event is open to the public and we're urging residents to attend and participate."

Media coverage is welcome. For more information, please contact: John Doe, Communications Director for _____ at 555-555-5555.

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SOCIAL MEDIA SAMPLES FOR AN EVENT

Social Media can be used to garner attention in advance of an event, and it can be used effectively during an event to reach a much larger audience. (For More Tips on Using Social Media, See the Next Chapter).

Here are two social media samples for an event:

Twitter

- Call2Action! Join us February XX at John Harris High to get a heads up on education funding from your lawmakers. [CLICK HERE](#) for details. #PASchoolsWork

Facebook

- Join us on Thursday, February XX at John Harris High in Harrisburg to ask your legislators about school funding challenges in the upcoming budget debate.

(Invite graphic pasted below text.)

USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a critical part of any successful outreach or advocacy campaign. Advocates can use social media proactively to:

- Share news and information about upcoming events.
- Build larger and more closely-connected networks of allies and supporters.
- Build relationships with reporters, lawmakers and other important stakeholders.

There are other social media platforms out there (Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, etc.) but Facebook and Twitter dominate. They are here to stay. Just consider:

- Facebook reports more than 1.8 billion daily users.
- Facebook delivers news: An October 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center found that more than half of U.S. adults (55%) get news often or sometimes from social media.
- Twitter reports more than 330 million monthly users.
- Twitter is an important tool for reporters: Nearly three in four journalists (73.3 percent) claim to use social media - and Twitter specifically - to develop relationships with potential news sources, according to one study.

Nearly every lawmaker has a Twitter account, and most lawmakers also have a Facebook page. Staff manage some of these platforms for lawmakers but there is no question that lawmakers are well aware of their social media platforms and interactions with constituents. Many lawmakers follow reporters on Twitter so you can join those online conversations as well. There are several tools available for free that allow users to schedule Tweets and Facebook posts. You can also measure your impact by simply tracking the number of followers, likes and shares you're receiving on Facebook; and the number of followers and retweets you are adding on Twitter.

Tips for Using Facebook:

Posts should be short and take only a few seconds to read.

- Share posts from pages as well as news stories to get your friends interested in your issue.
- Photographs, infographics and short video clips will gain more attention, shares and likes. Text alone is far less engaging.
- Remember to ask friends to share your posts and “like” the pages you share.
- Facebook is driven by user stories, so when posting news articles or other materials, try to add a personal note explaining why the post is important to you and your community.
- Make sure to monitor the comments and delete any that are offensive or rude.
- Posts that end in a question usually get the most comments, so ask away and especially ask for direct feedback to your latest post.

Tips for Using Twitter

For newcomers, the [Twitter Help Center](#) is a great place to start. You can also find a Twitter tutorial on [YouTube](#).

Tips for Tweeting:

- Keep tweets short. Twitter allows up to 280 characters, so you don’t have a choice, but less is more.
- Tweeting a photo, infographic or website link will generate more retweets and a stronger response.
- Try and use a hashtag (#) with every tweet. You can find the most popular hashtags by using Twitter’s search function, which will show you related tweets.
- Retweeting is an excellent way to stay engaged and get more followers. Retweet news stories as often as possible.
- Tweeting Legislators helps get their attention as well as their followers.
- When Tweeting, keep in mind the entire universe your Tweet will reach.
- Stick to policy and personal stories and stay away from partisan politics.

SAMPLING OF STATEWIDE INFORMATION RESOURCES ON EDUCATION

Education Associations

- PA Association of School Administrators, www.pasa-net.org
- PA Association of School Business Officials, www.pasbo.org
- PA Principals Association, www.paprincipals.org
- PA School Boards Association, www.psba.org
- PA Association of Rural and Small Schools, www.parss.org
- PA Association of Intermediate Units, www.paiu.org
- PA Association of Career and Technical Administrators, www.pacareertech.org

Education Advocacy Groups and Coalitions

- A+ Schools, www.aplusschools.org
- Allies for Children, www.alliesforchildren.org
- American Federation of Teachers, www.aft.org
- Council for a Strong America, www.strongnation.org
- Education Law Center, www.elc-pa.org
- Education Voters, www.educationvoterspa.org
- League of Women Voters, www.palwv.org
- Make the Road, www.maketheroadpa.org
- PA Schools Work, www.paschoolswork.org
- PA Partnerships for Children, www.papartnerships.org
- Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers, www.pa.aft.org
- Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition, www.paimmigrant.org
- PSEA, www.psea.org
- Public Citizens for Children and Youth, www.pccy.org
- Public Interest Law Center, www.pubintl.org
- Urban League, www.urbanleaguephila.org

Think Tanks and Research Institutions

- Research for Action, www.researchforaction.org
- Temple Center on Regional Politics, <http://www.cla.temple.edu/corp>
- Keystone Research Center, www.keystonereseearch.org
- PA Budget and Policy Center, www.pennpbc.org

Government

- PA Department of Education,
<http://www.education.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx#tab-1>
- PA Senate Education Committee,
<http://education.pasenategop.com/>
- PA House Education Committee,
<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/cteInfo/index.cfm?CteeBody=H&Code=12>

Funding Lawsuit

- <https://www.fundourschoolspa.org/>