



*Why you should let your voice be heard at the statehouse—and how you should go about it*

# Personal POLITICAL POWER

**BY JOEL BLACKWELL**

**A**s a school board member or professional educator, you no doubt have some kind of job description—at least in your mind if not in writing. But it probably does not contain a single reference to one of your most important responsibilities: political advocacy. And even if it does, it's unlikely you've had much training or education to improve your skills in this important arena.

Whether you are a superintendent, principal, board member, or teacher, your future and the future of the children you serve depends as much on what happens in your state legislature and the U.S. Congress as what happens in your day-to-day activities.

What is your role as a political advocate? Let's take a look.

First, understand that you can have a powerful impact when you communicate with elected officials. It's important to recognize this because it's contrary to the image you see on television and read in newspapers.

The media almost universally portray politicians as kowtowing to "special interests" and ignoring ordinary citizens, but nothing could be further from the truth. Most Americans accept

this view, however, and don't contact their elected officials.

This gives you power. The few people who get to know their lawmakers, write letters, send faxes and e-mails, and make phone calls have disproportionate power because so many people never get involved in the process.

As someone said in one of my training seminars: "The people who write the letters write the laws."

If you doubt it, look at the studies by academics and other groups that are designed to find out what influences Congress and state legislatures. Yes, money and special interests do have power, but in every study where it is present, constituent communication is the most powerful influence.

The fact is, on most issues, most politicians lift a finger to see which way the wind is blowing among voters, and that's the way they probably will go. Your job—and you can add this to your job description—is to make the wind blow.

The question is, "How?"

## **Six steps are all it takes**

Because they represent you, your senator and representative have to care about what you think. You, and others like you, de-

termine whether they remain in office beyond their current term.

I have interviewed more than 500 state and federal elected officials and their staff members, asking how they want to be lobbied and what they need from volunteer advocates. What they want from you is substantially different from what they expect from the professional lobbyists who work for the associations that represent superintendents, principals, boards, and teachers.

Chances are, your professional organization has an advocacy agenda and trained professionals whose job is to carry it out. The professionals are expected to know the nuances and details of legislation line by line. They need to know how a bill moves through Congress. You don't need to know any of that, although it's useful.

As a board member or administrator, you already know everything you need to become an effective advocate. You are an expert in your area of education. You know more than the politicians do about the day-to-day operations in your schools. You know the impact of legislation on your buildings, teachers, and students. That's what politicians need to hear from you.

If you want to get your legislator to take action, I have developed a six-step process to help you maximize your impact. The process came following observations and interviews with many, many politicians and staff members, and it works. Whether you are approaching elected officials on your own or at the urging of your professional organization, here is what you need to do:

**1. Tell them who you are.** Don't just identify yourself by your business card. Make sure they know how long you've worked for education, what your family background is, how deep your roots in the community are. The goal is for politicians to remember and understand you in the context of their constituency. Remember, you will be the eighth or 10th person in a long line of people they talk to. What are you going to say so they remember you?

**2. Tell a story from your life and your school to illustrate your point.** The story must be true and relevant, using details, names, and dates. We all remember stories better than data; stories carry an emotional content that data lacks. Engage their heart to engage their mind.

**3. Explain what you want as specifically as possible.** To pass a bill, change a bill, or kill a bill, write letters to other politicians or an agency. This information will normally come from your state school boards or administrators association. If you don't know what you want, consider why you are meeting with legislators. (You might be building the relationship by asking how you can help them, for example.) They are busy, so have a purpose when you occupy their time.

**4. Provide three good outcomes if the legislators support you.** These should show the impact on schools and children in the legislator's district.

**5. Ask for support.** Many people forget this step. If you forget, you give legislators permission to ignore you. Ask very specifically, "Will you vote with us? Will you write the letter?" Usually, you will not get a commitment because politicians want to hear from others before making a commitment. To

probe further, ask this open-ended question: "How do you feel about what I've said?" This gives the person a chance to offer any objections or doubts and provides you with an opportunity to respond. Since you are unlikely to get a definite answer, ask, "When can I expect an answer?" Then follow up relentlessly—and politely—until you get an answer.

**6. Report results to your organization and send thank you notes to everyone you spoke with.** Don't forget to include secretaries and other staff members in this list.

These simple techniques work because they address the needs of the politician and help you build a relationship. You become more than just a person with a title who wants help.

### **Influence gets results**

The quality of your relationship with a staff member or a legislator will determine your success more than anything else. Why? On almost every question, a politician hears from lots of people on both sides of the issue. The information one side provides will be in conflict with messages from the other side, and the two will cancel each other out.

The decision will then turn on which person the politician wants to help. The fact is, on most issues, a legislator or representative doesn't care who wins. Politicians rarely have a personal stake in the outcome of a vote. So, all things being equal, politicians will help their friends.

This is the difference between people who have influence and people who just have information. It helps if you have lots of good information when you speak to a politician, but if solid data and talking points were all it took to win, we would have a very different set of laws.

You need to develop influence. If you have influence, when you walk in the door, a politician will want to help you.

How do you get there? By helping your legislators before you ask for anything. Never ask for something until you have done so much for politicians that they cannot wait to help you.

If this sounds cynical, think about the people you care about and want to help. Aren't they the ones you know and like? In politics, as in life, we all gravitate to those who support us and will help them first.

Politicians may never, ever care about your issue, but you can get them to care about you. You do this by systematically and deliberately helping the politicians you need. What does that mean?

Start by asking your senators and representatives what you can do to help. You will immediately stand out among all the people they meet because hardly anyone approaches them in this way. You can sit down and easily come up with a list of helpful things you can do. For example:

■ **Give money.** Particularly this year, during elections, making contributions can be a big help. Politicians, just like religious institutions, the Boy Scouts, and hospitals, have to raise money to run a campaign. Federal candidates and many state candidates cannot accept money from corporations. They have to get it from individuals like you.

■ **Work in the campaign.** You will meet interesting peo-

ple, have fun, and develop a relationship with both the politician and staff.

■ **Provide information.** Public education does not have to be your sole issue. Because of your perspective, you can provide information about other important concerns in your community.

■ **Offer speaking opportunities and publicity.** Got a meeting? Invite the politician. Got a newsletter? Put the legislator's picture in it and send him or her a copy.

You get the idea. Find helpful things you can do and do them.

### **Power comes from relationships**

Because 2004 is an election year, giving money and working on political campaigns are important elements in your strategy to build influence. Just keep in mind what you're about. The goal is not simply to get your candidate elected (although it's great when that happens). What's more, your ability to elect someone solely because of your influence is very limited. The vast majority of incumbents will be reelected as long they are eligible and want to seek another term.

Ultimately, your goal in working on political campaigns is to build relationships with people who can help you—regardless of their party or persuasion. Tough as it is, this may mean helping someone whose other views you oppose, but who can

help you on education issues.

When you vote, you are helping decide who gets hired to represent you. But the politician's success is determined by what happens in the ensuing weeks and months. As you would with any new employee, you need to give your elected official constant direction and coaching. Just because candidates have been elected does not mean the voters, or anyone else, has told them what to do, even though they may say, "The voters have spoken" or, "The voters have given me a mandate."

Even if they do have a "mandate," it usually concerns only one issue, and it's probably not your issue. You still have to tell elected officials what you want.

If you don't, you leave them free to do whatever they choose. More significantly, they will undoubtedly hear from people on the other side. If they don't hear from you, you give them permission to go the other way.

Start now. After Election Day, you can start the six-step process of letting your legislators know how they can help. And, if you have done as I suggest, you will find they can't wait to be of assistance.

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## **THE VIEW FROM THE LOBBY**

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, superintendents, and administrators have more leverage with their elected leaders than they realize, according to lobbyists with state and national education organizations. And, in a time when states and Congress are increasingly legislating what occurs in the nation's classrooms, it is critical to make that leverage count.

"It is the people back home who are voters who affect how a member of Congress is going to decide an issue," says Barry Sackin, vice president for policy for the American School Food Service Association. "Some groups have strictly the grassroots element, but they don't have the time—they're all working—to do the kind of in-depth policy work we do here. So you need both, professionals working here, and people working back at home."

Dan Fuller, director of federal programs for the National School Boards Association, says school board members are "ideal candidates to lobby Congress." Board members "are in a unique position because they are also elected," he says.

"This gives them greater credibility by virtue of the fact they are elected by the same people who elect their state and federal representatives," Fuller says. "They have a political understanding, in addition to an educational understanding, of what is necessary for schools."

Michelle White, a lobbyist for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, says legislators who are making decisions at the state and federal level tell her they don't

hear from principals enough.

"In this day and age when the federal government is coming into the classroom, you must make your voice heard," White says. "It's not an arduous process. It's not complicated. It doesn't take hours a day just to write a letter. We work very hard to make it easy for principals to communicate with Congress. A phone call can make a world of difference."

Nancy Stanley, a lobbyist for the Michigan Association of School Administrators, agrees.

"I don't think the general public understands how much impact you can have with one letter or one phone call," Stanley says. "People think legislators get a lot of phone calls and letters, and they do, but not on the same subject and not always from their constituents. So while they might get 100 letters in a day, they might be on 100 different topics. If you empower others to write and suddenly they get 10 letters from constituents, ... it gets their attention."

Sackin, who was a school food service director for 14 years, says administrators and board members must not be afraid to serve as advocates for their cause: educating children across America.

"Lobbyist is not a four-letter word," Sackin says. "You are the expert. Your job is to build relationships and credibility with members of Congress and their staffs. When a member of Congress says, 'I'm going to do something for kids because it's the right thing to do,' and you know you have helped him make that decision, there are very few things as rewarding as having that sense of making a difference."—J.B.