Communicating with Your Legislator

Things to Remember:

1. *Don’t underestimate your influence:* Legislators pay attention to the issues raised by voters in their districts, especially during an election year. Just a couple of letters from constituents on the same topic can be enough to register an issue as very important for a Senator or Assembly representative. The district or hometown connection is essential to getting a legislator’s attention. By the same token, it is important to write only the Senator or State Representative who represents you. Letters from voters who live outside their districts are often discarded by legislators.

2. *Know your legislator:* Before contacting your legislator, do a little homework. If you are unsure of who your State Senator or State Representative is, click on: http://legis.wisconsin.gov/w3.asp/waml/waml.aspx. Once you identify your legislators, go to the legislator’s home page to find out their committee assignments. If either your Senator or State Representative serves in leadership, or is a member of either the Education Committee or Joint Committee on Finance, your involvement as an advocate for WSRA is extremely important. If you are sure of who your legislators are, you can go to Education Committee Members to find out if they serve on the education committee. To find out if your Senator serves in a leadership position go to: http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senhome.htm. Assembly leadership can be found here: http://legis.wisconsin.gov/asmhome.htm. At these sites you can also find out which bills your legislator has sponsored which may be helpful in determining how they might feel about issues important to WSRA.

3. *Don’t forget the legislator’s staff:* This is especially important if you call or visit your legislator’s office. Often staff has more time to devote to your concerns and have considerable influence with your legislator.

4. *Enlist the support of others in your area:* If legislators are hearing the same message from others in the local school community, the message becomes even more effective. Be sure to first enlist other members of WSRA in the advocacy campaign. Then talk to principals and school district administrators and ask for their help in your advocacy efforts with legislators.

5. *Don’t assume you need to be an expert in legislative advocacy:* But you are an expert in how to teach kids to read. Establish your credentials in your field and convince them first why they should listen to you. It’s all part of becoming a resource for accurate information in an important and often complicated field where most legislators have no expertise.

6. *Remember human nature:* Like everyone else, legislators respond better to courtesy and appreciation. Legislators get many more complaints than compliments. Threats and ultimatums do little to convince a legislator to support your position and may in fact inspire them to actively oppose WSRA’s position. Always use a respectful tone in any communication. It’s okay to disagree with the legislator, but never attack him or her personally. Always thank them for listening to your point of view and follow-up any meeting or letter from them with an appropriate thank you.
7. **Visit Madison**: A face-to-face visit with the legislator is the most effective means of communication. It is essential to establish a comfortable working relationship with your elected officials and their staff. When the need arises, or at the suggestion of WSRA's Legislative and Advocacy Committees, you can schedule a meeting in Madison when the legislature is not in session, so there is less competition for the legislator's time and attention.

8. **Schedule an in-district meeting**: Consider inviting a legislator to a local council meeting if you are expecting attendance of more than 20 people. Again, the goal here is to establish a trusting relationship. Ideally, you would like to have a legislator call you for your opinion when an issue affecting literacy comes before the legislature. When legislators feel connected to your issues, they will be more likely to offer their support. And they appreciate opportunities to interact with their constituents, especially during an election year.

9. **Telephone Calls**: Once you have established a relationship, telephone calls are appropriate and easy. Regular contact with staff is possible and desirable. When should you call? Call to ask support before a hearing or floor vote. You may make an annual call or visit to keep the legislator/staff informed of trends and problems that have surfaced during the year.

10. **Letters**: They are the fuel that powers the legislative process. Letters are read. Letters elicit responses. They represent votes. Each letter writer is deemed to represent several like-minded, if less highly motivated constituents. Letters may be formal or informal, typed or handwritten. They should be composed by you, giving reasons for WSRA's position and how it will make a difference for the lawmaker's constituents.

11. **E-mail**: This is a good option when time is of the essence. Make your message brief, using the guidelines here for effective letter writing.

12. **The Media**: When there are important issues affecting literacy being debated in Madison, it can be effective to use the media as a method of communication. Legislators and their aides monitor hometown newspapers. Consider writing a letter to the editor or a guest editorial in your local newspaper when the time is right.