

# ENGAGING IN LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

BY PATRICK D. CUNNINGHAM

Recently, I've been learning a lot about the importance of school counselors engaging in legislative advocacy at state and local levels. Sometimes change for the benefit of both the students we work with and the profession requires large-scale change and new legislation. As a school counselor with limited knowledge of the legislative process, I reached out to several leaders in the field who regularly engage in and organize legislative advocacy efforts, as well as some of the lobbyists who partner with us. From these conversations, I learned that this form of advocacy work isn't as intimidating as it may seem, particularly if you keep certain tips in mind.

also partner with lobbyists, who are experts in the legislative process, to help navigate the political maze. These leaders often reach out to individual school counselors in specific voting districts to promote targeted letter-writing and phone-calling campaigns. They can also help provide important talking points and sample letters if you are feeling anxious about your first time engaging in this type of work.

**Write to or call your legislator:** Phone calls and letter-writing are an easy and effective way to advocate for specific pieces of legislation. Think about it this way: why would representatives support a bill if they haven't received a single phone call or letter from a constituent

raising technical or complex points, it's best to put them in digestible terms. Bullet points can draw their attention to your most important information. This is particularly important if you are working closely with a legislator or if you are being called in to testify on behalf of a piece of legislation.

**Build a long-term relationship:**

Developing a relationship with your legislators is an important way to be a part of the long-term policymaking conversation. Consider inviting them in to see your school or attend an event. Then, keep an ongoing dialogue with them about the things you're seeing in your work. This will build trust and allow them to think of you when they

**Legislators probably don't understand what school counselors do, the ways the field has shifted over the past 30 years or the challenges that we face. But we do. We are the experts, and our voices are extremely important.**

**Understand your audience:** Legislators are public servants, and most of them are in their jobs for the right reason - they want to pass legislation important to their constituents. They want to stand behind pieces of legislation that are meaningful and that will benefit the people they serve. With that said, they are likely not experts in school counseling or education. They probably don't understand what school counselors do, the ways the field has shifted over the past 30 years or the challenges that we face. But we do. We are the experts, and our voices are extremely important.


**Connect with your state school counseling association:** Your state school counseling association probably has a committee dedicated to local- and state-level advocacy efforts. They focus on coordinating the grassroots legislative advocacy effort of school counselors across the state. Some may

about it? Elected officials want to know what is important to their constituents. At the very least, they want to support bills their constituents are vocal about so they can demonstrate their track record when running for re-election.

**Tell a story:** In your phone calls and letters, it is important to share your stories and your students' stories. Make it personal. Explain how the bill in question has a real impact on your work and what it could mean for your students. Share how your work has a positive impact on students and what you need to be more effective. Again, legislators aren't experts in school counseling, but anyone can understand a well-told story.

**Keep it simple:** It's helpful to condense things into simple, understandable terms when you engage with legislators. They are trying to be jacks-of-all-trades in reviewing the many policies up for vote. Therefore, if you're

need insight on a bill. You may even end up getting calls from them regularly asking for your thoughts on particular legislation. At the very least, find your legislators on social media and follow them. This is the easiest way to stay connected to your elected officials and to learn about the progress they are making.

I truly believe that if enough of us in the profession are contacting our representatives about legislation important to us, we can certainly make an impact. Please join me in amplifying the voice of our profession to better support students. 

Patrick Cunningham is a doctoral student in counselor education at The Ohio State University. He can be reached at [cunningham.1062@buckeyemail.osu.edu](mailto:cunningham.1062@buckeyemail.osu.edu)