Exercising the Power of Grassroots Advocacy

Sally McConnell

As a principal, you have more power to influence legislation than you might believe.
As the leader of your school, you are in a unique position not only to provide guidance and inspiration to your staff, students, and community, but to influence political decisions that impact you and your school. As the acknowledged expert on your school and the needs of your students, your input is of great value to policymakers at local, state, and national levels.

**IN BRIEF**

Principals need to realize the importance of making their opinions known to local, state, and federal lawmakers. They can accomplish this by becoming grassroots lobbyists. The author, a professional lobbyist, provides practical tips for establishing influential relationships with U.S. senators and representatives, as well as state and local legislators.
The problem is that many principals fail to realize the importance of making their voices heard in city hall, the state capital, or on Capitol Hill. They may think, “I’m just one person. How can I make a difference?” or “I don’t think my superintendent would like for me to get involved” or “Politics is ugly. I don’t want any part of it.”

This must change. It’s important for you to get past such concerns and embrace your power to influence lawmaking. If your “one” voice is directed to the right policymaker—and joined with others—you will make a difference.

It Pays to Lobby
Grassroots lobbying works. I know because I’ve witnessed it time and time again. NAESP has had a number of lobbying successes on Capitol Hill that are attributable in large part to the grassroots action taken by our members. Here’s an example:

When the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was being developed, NAESP determined that one area of the law that needed improvement related to the professional development of principals. Heretofore, the ESEA had provided professional development funding mainly for teachers, including principals only “where appropriate.” As might be expected, such vague language almost always excluded principals and NAESP wanted equity for its members.

Working closely with some legislators on Capitol Hill and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, NAESP lobbied successfully for a $10 million grant program to provide professional development for principals. But this program would not exist if NAESP members had not answered the call for action, contacting Congress at every step of the legislative process to lobby for its passage. As a result, the program sailed through Congress as part of what is now known as the No Child Left Behind Act. Such is the power of grassroots action!

Be an NAESP Activist
There are a number of ways that you can assist NAESP in its advocacy efforts.

- Join other NAESP members as a Key Contact. The goal of this program is to match at least one principal with every U.S. senator and representative for the purpose of forming a productive working relationship and providing input on education matters pending in Congress. To become a Key Contact, sign up at www.naesp.org or call NAESP Government Relations at 800-386-2377. You’ll receive a special welcoming gift and have access to a series of exclusive quarterly conference calls for activists. Each call includes an update on Capitol Hill action and an open discussion by participants of their recent experiences, challenges, and concerns.

- Read Capitol Contacts, NAESP’s monthly advocacy e-newsletter, sent by NAESP’s Government Relations department to all NAESP members who have provided e-mail addresses. Each issue includes an update on current legislation, a special advocacy tip, a story from the field, and other information designed to support your involvement as an activist.

- Each state has an NAESP federal relations coordinator, a practicing principal who has volunteered to be active in the legislative process and to communicate with other principals in his or her state. Each year, NAESP brings all of the federal relations coordinators to Washington for the Federal Relations Conference, where they receive briefings on legislation and engage in a full day of lobbying on Capitol Hill. If you’re interested in becoming a federal relations coordinator, contact your state principals’ association.

- Visit NAESP’s Federal Legislative Action Center (FLAC) at www.naesp.org. When you click on the FLAC icon, you’ll receive updates and action alerts as well as direct e-mail access to your senators and representatives. You can also sign up to receive these updates and alerts directly by e-mail.

Know Your Legislators
Now that you understand the need to take on the role of a lobbyist, you’re probably wondering how to go about it. You may never have met your senators or your representative. They may seem very remote, spending so much time in Washington. Most, however, return to their states and districts on weekends and during congressional recesses. During those home visits, they often hold public meetings and schedule office
hours specifically for meeting with constituents. Local and state lawmakers are generally even more accessible.

It’s really not that difficult to get in touch and stay in touch with your senators, representatives, and state and local lawmakers. Here are some tips for establishing positive relationships with them:

Invite them to your school. The school visit can be a particularly effective venue for getting acquainted with your elected officials. It provides a comfortable setting for you to show off your school and the good use you are making of federal, state, and local funds. You can invite the legislator to address a school assembly, give out awards at a special ceremony, read to young children, or participate in other activities. Politicians generally like to visit schools because they want to be seen as supporters of education and a school visit provides them with great photo opportunities.

Attend public meetings. When federal and state legislators are home, they often hold public meetings during which they review their activities and respond to questions and concerns from their constituents. Consider attending such public events and seize opportunities to introduce yourself, voice your opinions, and ask questions. It’s a good way to let your legislators know who you are and what your feelings are on important education issues.

Volunteer your time and expertise. Let your federal and state legislators know that you are willing to serve on advisory committees that focus on education. Several NAESP members who have served on such committees report that they have been pleased to have their views solicited and considered on matters of concern to principals.

You may also choose to volunteer in an election campaign as a way of demonstrating your support for a candidate who reflects your views on education. Another way to show your support is to host an informal get-together to introduce the candidate to others who share your views.

"In all meetings and communication with legislators, bring your issues home by telling how they affect your school and your students."

Spread the word. Send e-mails to your elected officials, expressing your opinion on proposed legislation, with copies to colleagues. Write reports for your school or state association newsletter of your meetings with elected officials and upcoming legislation that may affect your school and students. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper or submit an opinion editorial, or op-ed, for publication.

Tell your story! In all meetings and
communication with legislators, bring your issues home by telling how they affect your school and your students. How did a particular student benefit from the Reading Recovery program that you initiated with Title I funds? What sort of progress has another student made because of help received from special education funded through the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act? Have discipline referrals decreased as a result of a program started with funds from the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program, or because of a counselor who was hired with funds from the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling program? These stories bring home the message in a way that makes it real and memorable to policymakers.

Always remember that as a principal you have the power to influence politics and politicians. Don’t hesitate to use that power to help your school, your students, your profession—and yourself!

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“How Is Your Day Going?”

We get asked this question many times a day and our response can determine not only how others view us, but can even impact the frame of mind of the person who asked it. If you say, “Things are great! How about you?” you have sent a positive message. But if you respond, “Not so great. That Jimmy Wallace is getting on my nerves!” you have sent a completely different message.

Effective principals understand that they are the filters for many of the things that occur in their schools every day. How they react to something will very often establish a tone for the entire school. This requires a certain amount of political skill. For example, if a second grader asks if you think her scribbled drawing is a good picture, what do you tell her? It is up to us to determine what gets through our filters and what does not.

The Angry Parent

When I was a principal, I occasionally had to deal with an irate parent. Once that parent—let’s call her Mrs. Jones—had left, I had some filtering choices to make. If a teacher innocently asked how my day was going, I had to choose which filter to use. If I said, “Things are great! How about with you?” the teacher would feel good and that feeling would carry on to the classroom.

But if I responded with, “Oh, I just dealt with that wacko Mrs. Jones. What a temper! I hope I never have to meet with her again,” what have I accomplished? For one, I have made that teacher terrified of Mrs. Jones. And if I continue to tell enough people about Mrs. Jones, every teacher in the school will have some degree of concern. In demonizing Mrs. Jones, I have shifted their time and energy to unproductive worrying and away from confidently approaching their students. I have made them more likely to hesitate when calling parents (especially with the surname Jones) because I have raised their level of concern. By protecting others from unnecessary bad news, we provide a more productive environment.

It’s Up to Us

We are very fortunate to work in education, although sometimes we forget how blessed we are. By consistently being the filter and sharing positive perspectives with our faculty and staff, we can create a much more successful educational setting. Consciously or unconsciously, we determine the tone of our organization.

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You Are the Filter

If you’re leading a diverse school community, shouldn’t your membership organization give you broad perspectives on school leadership?

The best schools are characterized by school leadership practices that build a shared sense of purpose and foster a commitment to excellence among all staff members. So it makes sense that the most useful perspectives on school leadership come from a source that is as broad and diverse as your school community. More than 60,000 principals and assistant principals and 27,000 district administrators choose ASCD as their membership organization, an education organization that also includes classroom teachers, school specialists, consultants, policymakers, school board members, parents, and others.

Join an Organization That’s About Ideas, Not Job Titles

More than any other education organization, ASCD exposes you to ideas that are critical to effective school leadership, including

- Which leadership practices are most apt to lead to increases in student achievement
- How to establish a professional community where teachers are committed to continuous improvement
- What leadership strategies develop your school’s leadership capacity so that all staff members take ownership of improvement efforts

ASCD . . . The Trusted Source on Teaching and Learning

Get Broad and Diverse Perspectives on School Leadership

Visit www.ascd.org/joinascd and join a community of effective school leaders.