



grassroots
advocacy

TOOLKIT

educate, then advocate



association of california school administrators
acsa.org/advocacy | [#ACSAadvocates](https://twitter.com/ACSAadvocates)

Grassroots advocacy, at its heart, is about influencing your local decision-makers by sharing your story and expertise. Grassroots advocacy activities can range from bringing up public education in a conversation or sharing an article on social media to inviting Assembly members or Senators to your district for a tour. The keys to a successful grassroots advocacy campaign are preparation and a clear message. In this document, you will find steps and suggestions for how to advocate for schools and students in your community and/or ACSA Region.

1. Do Your Research and Find Support

Utilizing resources within your ACSA Region is the best place to start. Reach out to your Region Consultant to help start building your team. Contact your Region Vice President for Legislative Action (VPLA). Current and former VPLAs are great resources if you are looking to dive into regional politics. They participate in political activity and organize regional groups for Legislative Action Day. Talk with fellow ACSA members too – you might be surprised to find out which of your colleagues lives down the street from your Senator or whose children play sports together. ACSA's Governmental Relations team is always there for you – call or email them for guidance.

2. Set A SMART Goal

Set a **Specific**, explicit goal for your team. Some examples: securing a meeting with Senator X regarding school safety (or another issue), hold an event with Assemblyperson Y at school site Z, or building a beneficial relationship with your legislator.

Make sure it's **Measurable**. If your goal is to educate your legislator, mark their engagement during your meeting and how often you interact with them afterward. Be sure to track your progress towards your goal with tangible evidence (ex. Phone calls, emails, etc.).

Make your goal **Attainable**. Asking a small group of individuals who are new to grassroots advocacy to hold a large event in four weeks is unrealistic. However, asking that same team to research their legislator(s) and contact their scheduler(s) in that same timeframe is reasonable.

Be **Realistic** and practical. Ask yourself and your team:

- Is the capacity for this event realistic? How time-intensive is this project?
- Will this event require funding, and if so, how much?
- Are there significant political barriers to this project? Who can I ask to make sure?
- How likely are you to get support from influential leaders? What is the best way to pitch your ideas to them?
- Is your team big enough and are their individual skills being utilized to their full potential?

Finally, include a **Timeline**, or a deadline. You may not always meet it, but having a detailed calendar creates structure and accountability. Setting shorter timelines within a larger plan is another effective way to engage your team.

3. Strong, Inclusive Community Organizing

Your campaign is only as strong as your community is organized. Regardless of your event size, be sure to capture your community's message and voice. Start the campaign small and strong. Set the tone by working with key leaders and letting people share ideas and concerns. Reach out both to people you have worked with in the past as well as interested individuals with new visions.

Encourage active listening, brainstorm agendas with your team, maintain a list of actionable items, and create an email chain. Utilize ACSA Region consultants, Region Leadership, and Region VPLAs. Finally, seize opportunity! Pre-planned events, like award ceremonies, roundtable discussions, or district-wide celebrations are great times to host your legislator and let them connect with students. These events are also ideal for social media promotion and public perception.

4. Define Your Message

Ideally, you will be reaching out to your legislator to touch base and build a functional, professional relationship in which you are able to educate your elected official about your district or school site. But you could also find yourself having a direct ask of your elected official, which can be harder to navigate, especially if you don't have an existing relationship. Ultimately, the strategy remains the same – *Educate, then Advocate*. The “Educate” portion may be shorter by necessity, but the talking points do not change. Several strategies to consider when developing your message, with or without the “ask”:

➤ Tell your story

You are the expert, and a key member of the community. You know how changes to laws and regulations are implemented and how they impact students and schools. Be ready to share your community's perspective without sounding accusatory toward your representative. Take a more explanatory route. If your elected official is new to their role, or does not have education as an “area of interest” on their website, offer yourself as a resource if they have questions. The more helpful you are, the more your legislator will seek you out when looking for insight on an issue.

➤ K.I.S.S.

With talking points, **Keep It Super Simple**. Avoid jargon, overly technical terms, or acronyms that may mean more to the education community than to your legislator. Take some time to translate technical Ed-speak into laymen's terms. Your message should be consistent, community-based, and short enough to remember and repeat easily. Inspiring and motivating stories about students are always a big hit. If you are at a school site during your meeting or event, pair these stories with actual students. Another tip: your legislator may raise concerns that take your discussion off-topic – bring the conversation back to your message before ending and moving on.

➤ Test your message

Once you have talking points and stories, find credible, friendly, likeable, and trustworthy spokespeople, but keep the number of speakers to a minimum – switching speakers during an event or meeting can detract from the message. Before your event or meeting, test your message on community members who can offer constructive criticism for revision. This can be trickier if you have a one-on-one meeting with your legislator, so practice with someone who has experience speaking with elected officials. If you need someone to listen to your talking points, reach out to an ACSA Governmental Relations staff member. Emails, calls, and meetings are always welcome.

➤ Know your audience

In one-on-one meetings, introduce yourself with your occupation and district name, and then add “ACSA member.” Taper your message for a large presentation and add details during a more intimate meeting. Try to anticipate questions, and have answers ready. It is okay to say you don't have an answer. Honesty is the best policy. But offer to follow-up, and then be sure you do so.

After you have set yourself up for success for your specific meeting or event, there are a couple other general bases you should cover before you meet with your elected official. Below are some reminders and notes to keep in mind whenever interacting within the political sphere, be it grassroots, at the Capitol or on social media.

I. Interacting with Elected Officials

Your goal is to become a dependable resource in the eyes of your representative. Therefore, your interactions must be friendly and professional. The more you know about your representative, the better you can connect with them, and the more collegial you are, the more likely you will be able to connect.

A hurdle you could face may be your legislator's scheduler. When reaching out to the district office, be polite but *persistent*. If a scheduler does not respond, try again within a reasonable amount of time. Call more than you email, and make your request far in advance.

Fridays are usually best for local visits while the California legislature is in session. However, during the months of October through December, legislators spend their weekdays in their home district.

Another great incentive for a meeting is if news outlets will be present. If you have good relationships with reporters at a local paper or news station, you could invite them to your school site visit, or other event. If so, make sure to mention this to the scheduler to incentivize the legislator's visit.

Below are some additional notes to remember when meeting with your legislator:

➤ **Preparing materials**

We recommend that you plan on doing the majority of the work of educating your representative verbally. *Knowing your talking points and presenting yourself as knowledgeable and reliable is more important than any materials.* If you must offer a "leave behind" make sure the content is minimal and relevant to the conversation.

➤ **You are a constituent**

You represent the students residing within that elected official's legislative district. You are also a constituent of that Assembly or Senate district. And if you live close to your worksite, you likely live within district boundaries.

➤ **Elected officials vs. their staff**

Grassroots advocates can sometimes assume that when planning a meeting or event, the only acceptable attendee is the legislator, and if a staff member attends in their place, the event is a failure. *This is a misconception.* The legislator most likely knows a little bit about many topics, but can be missing in-depth knowledge. The staffer's understanding of education may be more substantive than the official they work for, so regardless of who attends, do your best to make connections during your conversations.

2. Do's & Don'ts of Social Media

- To show ACSA who you've met with and what you've been working on, **DO** set up professional accounts on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn (keeping your personal accounts separate).

- **DO** the “work” of online networking before, not only after, an event.
- **SEARCH AND USE** relevant hashtags like #ACSAadvocates, and tag fellow participants and organizations.
- **BE** positive. Social media is not a place to share the negative aspects of your meeting. If your legislator was unable to make your event or meeting, do not call them out on social media. This is counterproductive.
- When confronted with a negative reaction on social media, consider if you know the person in real life, if you can relate to their point of view, and if you can single out the underlying issue of the negative post. If the answer is no then **DON'T** respond.
- **POST** photos. Whether it is a wrap-up picture at the end of your meeting, a photo during your legislator’s talk at an event, or a group photo of all the ACSA advocates on your team, social media thrives on photos.
- **BE** concise, succinct, and inclusive – share your appreciation for the opportunity to meet, tag everyone involved, then post and call it a day.
- **DON'T** leave your professional account set to “Private” or people outside your network won’t see what you post, even if you tag them.

Contact us:

Do you have questions regarding this toolkit, your advocacy event or ACSA’s grassroots advocacy opportunities, please contact Sarah Monte at smonte@acsa.org or (916) 444-3216.