

Advocacy 101: Understanding the Basics

Community Schools need strong advocates. Every single day, nonprofit organizations and community schools engage in advocacy that advances their work and vision. Simply put, advocacy is sharing your point of view and ideas with legislators with the objective being to generate their support for your work. It is also a great way to engage policy makers in discussion of issues constituents, like you, face in your communities.

Building relationships with elected officials takes time and effort, and is as important as intense advocacy on any single legislative issue. The goal of advocacy activities is the development of a relationship — with members of Congress as well as at the state level, with state senators and representatives, and their respective staffs. To these policy makers,

You are viewed as a credible source of information on community schools;
Your input is valued and sought; and
Your calls get returned.

You are the conduit between what is happening in their communities and to their constituents. **You** have a great story to share about your community school, its students, parents and community impact. **You** can share that story in a way that will make a difference – that is why you advocate. Telling your story in a concise way that is connected to the overall community school movement is the key to advocacy success.

As an advocate, your most meaningful contacts with your elected officials should occur when lawmakers are *not* embroiled in critical education debates, whether educational improvement or funding issues. You should invite them to your school for a tour, or to speak with your principal about his/her community school; to develop your relationship with them through contacts at community events; and to share important school and community information with them all the time, not just during an advocacy campaign. These efforts will result in partnerships that have a strong foundation. Partnership based on mutual respect and trust is a valuable asset when we need to turn to our legislative leaders for support and assistance regarding community school policy.

Why should you advocate?

The Federation for Community Schools plays a vital role in advocating for community schools, but we cannot do this work alone. This is where YOU join the movement.

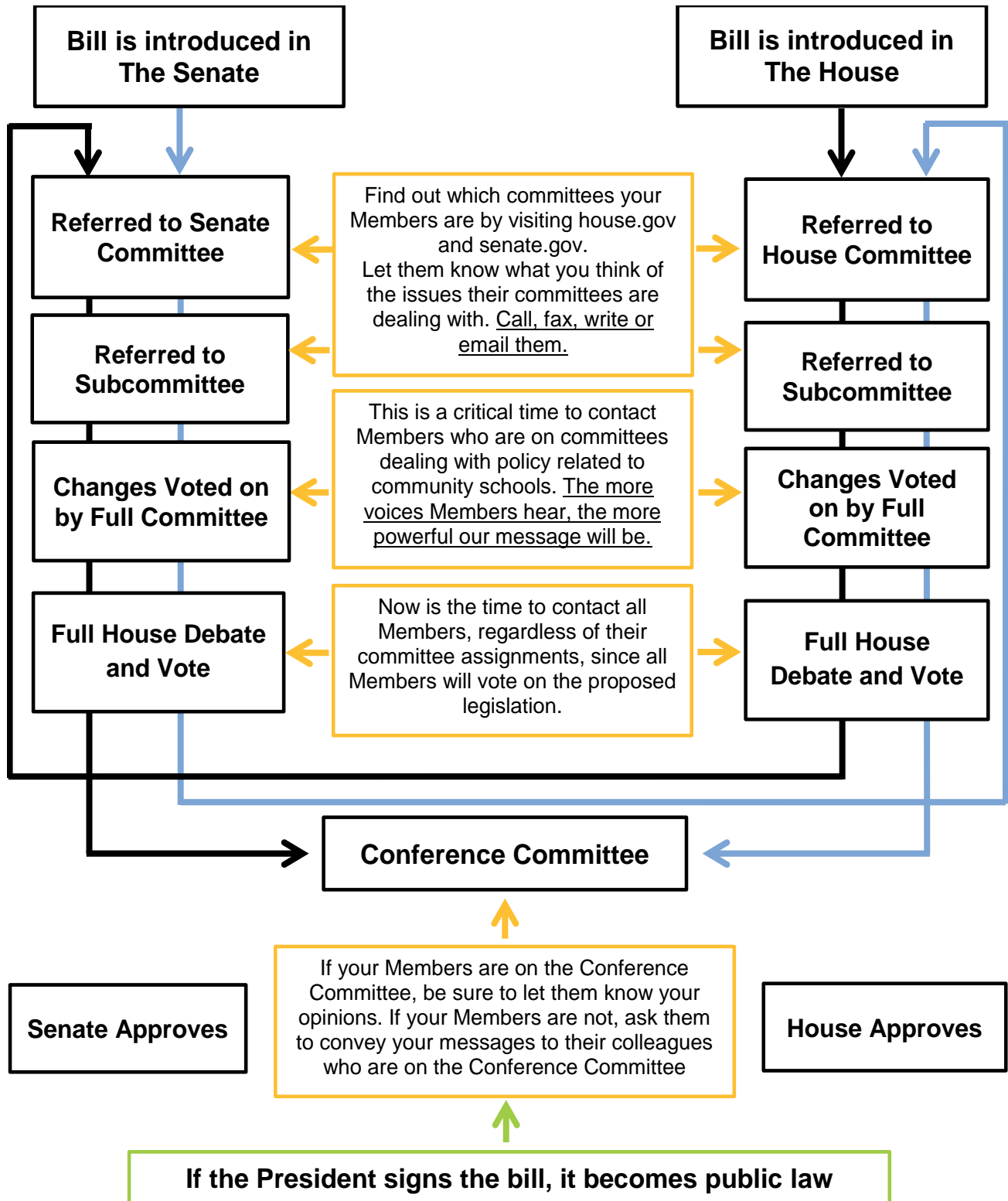
The Federation can communicate the community school message, propose policy recommendations to support this work, analyze the impact of proposals on community schools, provide extensive data and information to legislators and their staffs, and build coalitions with other state and national groups with similar goals. But your involvement, your perspective and voice, as a constituent and community leader, is essential to make representatives care enough about the issue to listen to the arguments, pro or con, and take a position. Legislators want to know what the people in their districts think about an issue before they take a position in Springfield, IL or Washington, D.C. You, as a constituent, have that power!

When to Advocate

Your job as an advocate is never done. It is critical to remind policy makers year-round of the importance of community school and afterschool programs. Legislators may be more responsive if you develop relationships with them through continuous communication. But, it is also helpful to understand the process of policy making, so that you can effectively advocate for community schools.

Advocacy as a Bill Becomes a Law

The legislative process can be a complicated one. The following diagram is intended to help refresh your knowledge on how a bill becomes a law, and how this process can impact policy decisions that affect your community school.



The Legislative Process and Advocacy

There are several stages in the legislative process where grassroots advocacy efforts can impact the outcome.

- **Bill Introduction/Sponsorship**
 - Legislators can be encouraged to introduce a bill to address a specific issue, or to co-sponsor a bill introduced by another senator or representative. Obtaining a large number of co-sponsors on a bill is one strategy for gaining attention and credibility for an issue.
- **Subcommittee (Federal)**
 - The most important time for constituent involvement is the subcommittee stage. Legislators are not yet committed to specific bills or legislative language. Grassroots advocates can communicate their position on the issue and suggest specific provisions or language. Action by constituents of subcommittee members can be very effective at this point.
- **Committee**
 - Grassroots advocacy at the committee stage is also very important, especially for the state advocacy. Communications may focus on supporting or opposing specific language developed by the subcommittee; providing testimony on an issue, encouraging legislators to sponsor amendments; and asking the committee member to vote for or against the bill. Again, action by constituents of committee members can be most effective.
- **Floor Vote**
 - Constituent communication with all senators and representatives is important when it comes to the floor vote. Grassroots efforts at this stage focus on encouraging a legislator to either vote for or against the bill; to sponsor a floor amendment; or to vote for or against a floor amendment offered by another legislator.
- **Conference**
 - Opportunities for grassroots impact are more limited at the conference stage. The Conference Committee works out the differences between similar bills passed by the House and Senate. However, grassroots communications — particularly from constituents of conferees — may influence whether the House or Senate provision is accepted in the compromise bill.
- **Floor Vote**
 - Once a conference committee has worked out the differences between the House and Senate version of a bill, floor passage is normally routine and not impacted by further constituent communication.

Policies and Budgets

Legislation and bills are one part of the work that members of Congress and the state's General Assembly are tasked with accomplishing. They also make critical policy and budgetary decisions ranging from what kinds of provisions are included in bills to what kinds of taskforces are formed to explore which issues. They also play a critical role in budget decisions and in deciding what kinds of programs and supports to fund, and what to cut. Many of the strategies and best practices outlined in this guide can be applied to both bill-specific advocacy, but also to advocacy in support of or opposing policy and budgetary decisions.