

Corresponding with your Legislator

The time-tested method of sending a written communication to your legislator remains one of the most effective ways to deliver your message to senators and representatives. What's new, however, is that you can now deliver the message through various channels including fax or email, and through social media, like Twitter and Facebook.

However it's received, letters and other forms of written personal communications remain probably your most effective communication tool — short of personal visits. Letters from constituents that are well-written, and briefly explain the issue and the proposal's impact, will be noticed in a congressional office.

As a citizen, you have the right to express your opinion to your elected official. The following are some recommendations for corresponding with your elected official¹:

- Always be polite and courteous. Legislators and their staff are considerably less likely to respond to rude or profane letters.
- Be as concise as possible. Remember that each office has dozens of legislative issues to cover and hundreds of constituent requests each day.
- Include your home or work address in every letter, even in e-mails.
- Thank the member of Senator or Representative for taking the time to read your letter.
- Remember that correspondence with any elected official is about building an ongoing relationship and persuading them to think of you as a resource. Even if an elected official does not agree with your point of view on an issue today, they might in the future.

Personalized communication from constituents is the most effective at all levels. This guide contains tips and samples for corresponding with your legislator. You can access their contact information by using the Illinois [State Board of Elections District/Official Search](http://bit.ly/1My8Koi) (<http://bit.ly/1My8Koi>), or the [Illinois General Assembly](http://www.ilga.gov/) website (<http://www.ilga.gov/>).

Addressing your letter to a senator or representative

Federal Lawmakers

U.S. Senator:

The Honorable _____(full name)
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

U.S. House of Representative:

The Honorable _____(full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Senator _____(last name)

Dear Representative _____(last name)

State Lawmakers

State Senator:

The Honorable _____(full name)
Senate of Illinois

State Representative:

The Honorable _____(full name)
Illinois House of Representatives

Dear Senator _____(last name)

Dear Representative _____(last name)

¹ PTA National <http://www.pta.org/files/Advocacy%20Toolkit-Corresponding%20With%20Congress.pdf>

A letter/email to your Senator or Representative should include the following items:

Salutation: Dear Senator _____,

Opening Paragraph:

- State the subject of your letter
- Use the bill number or name, if available
- Identify yourself and your community school or organization

Example: “I am the resource coordinator/director of _____ **Community School** which annually serves _____ **students and their families**” or “I provide _____ **programs** at a community school that teach children how to _____.”

Body of Letter:

- Explain the issue simply and factually at a level the senator or representative will understand. They’re not experts!
 - Give a local, personal, example of the impact of the issue to make the legislator care.
 - State your position on the bill or provision, whether you support it or oppose it.
 - Be polite. There’s always another issue to fight another day.
 - Thank the senator or representative for their attention to the issue.
 - Let the senator or representative know you are a resource for more information.
 - Ask for a reply.
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Tips for Effective Letter Writing

- Target the appropriate legislators (In the district where you live, and where your organization/community school is located).
- Limit the length of your letter to no more than two pages, one if possible.
- Avoid ready-made letters or modify them to deliver a unique message. Legislators are more likely to be influenced by these.
- Give your credentials when appropriate.
- Avoid personal criticism.
- Express appreciation for past or future support.
- Ask the legislator to send you a letter stating his/her position on the issue.
- Fax/email your letter to your senator or representative if the time-frame for action is short.

Sample Email/Letter to Elected Official

U.S. House of Representative:

The Honorable **(full name)**
(Room #) (Name) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative **(insert name)**:

We are pleased to share with you that our organization, _____, was awarded a 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) grant. The grant has a five-year lifecycle, and we will use that funding to provide supports and services to students and families **are _____ (list of schools you work with)**. We look forward to continuing and expanding our work with children and families in _____ **(your community)**.

There are, however, a couple of challenges with the way the state has decided to structure the funding for this grant.

First, ISBE will be funding the FY15 cohort grantees at 90% of the original funding requests. While we appreciate that this is a way to fund a larger number of applications it also means that we (and other grantees) will need to amend our plans and goals, and serve fewer children and families.

Second, the grant announcements were late in coming, and so grants that should have started with the fiscal year, on July 1st are starting now instead. There are challenges and inefficiencies inherent in trying to utilize a full year's funding in impactful ways in only seven months.

The good news is that ISBE can solve these problems. Federal 21st CCLC guidance allows for states to make decisions about carrying over funds. This flexibility means that ISBE could set the FY15 grant levels at 50-60% of the total requested funding, and re-allocated the remaining funds over the next four years of the grant to bring the FY16-19 funding levels up to 100% of requested funding.

Shifting the funding structure in this way would ameliorate the challenges grantees face trying to effectively and appropriately use the full FY15 funding in seven months. It would also set funding for the remainder of the grant lifecycle at levels that will enable grantees to implement programs as proposed.

[Insert a story about your community school. Special programs you offer, unique needs of families you're meeting, and outcomes]

We have respectfully asked ISBE to consider the above proposal to maximize the use of 21st CCLC funds and to enable grantees to implement programs as they were crafted in their original proposals. We are asking for your support on this issue with ISBE, as well. The changes we are recommending will enable us to serve _____ **(numbers of students and families you proposed serving)** students and families in our community in the most efficient and impactful way.

Sincerely,

(Insert name and address)

Calling your Legislator

The effect of the phone call is similar to that of letter writing. As with all grassroots advocacy, your call is most likely to receive attention if you have developed a personal relationship with the legislator or staffer. Often, calls are “logged” as for or against a particular issue. Sometimes, you may not get past the receptionist or intern. Nonetheless, making a well-timed call can be particularly important. And, especially when combined with calls from your colleagues on the same issue, the call may tip the balance in your favor. So, don’t hesitate to call.

The easiest way to reach your Senator or Representative is to call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard: (202) 224-3121. You can also find the direct number to any member's office by consulting the [Senate phone list](#), the [House phone list](#) or the [Illinois General Assembly](#) site.

The easiest way to contact your State Senator or State Representative is to use the [Illinois General Assembly site](#) to find his/ her Springfield or district office number.

Whether you’re calling a member of Congress or your state-level elected officials, some guidelines remain the same.

For Whom Should You Ask?

- Ask for the senator or representative if you know them personally.
- If you don’t know the senator or representative, ask to speak with the legislative assistant who handles your issue. For most issues, that probably will be the legislative assistant who handles education issues.
- If you can’t reach a legislative assistant, leave a concise message. Legislative offices do count the number of calls they receive on an issue — pro and con — and relay that information to the senator or representative.

Tips for Making Effective Phone Calls

- Focus on a single issue, making two or three key points in your phone call.
- Have talking points — or your own notes — in front of you when you call to stay focused on the message you want to deliver.
- Make the issue local -- localize the issue to demonstrate the impact on the legislator’s own constituents.
- Clearly state the action you wish the senator or representative to take on the issue (vote for, vote against, offer an amendment, delete a provision, etc.).
- Keep your call brief — not more than three or four minutes.
- Don’t bluff if you are asked a question you can’t answer. Tell them you’ll get the answer and get back to them.
- Leave your name and telephone number with the staff to whom you’ve spoken in case they have any questions later.
- Jot down the name of the legislative assistant you spoke to and put it in your phone book. Next time, you can ask for him or her by name and begin building a relationship. Staffers are more likely to listen to and return phone calls from people they know.
- Send a thank you note. ([See Sample Thank You Letter](#))

Sample Phone Conversation

Staff Member: Thank you for calling Representative **(Name)**'s office. How may I help you?

Caller: Hello, my name is **(your name)** from **(City and State)**, and I am calling on behalf of **(your community school/organization)** and the Federation for Community Schools.

Staff Member: Wonderful, what can I do for you?

Caller: As a constituent of Representative **(Names)**'s district, **(Insert information on why you support community schools, or any specific legislation you support specific to our work. Include why this subject is of concern to the Representative's constituents)** Remember, be brief!

Staff Member: Thank you for sharing your concerns with us, and I will relay your comments on to the member of Congress.

Caller: Thank you for this information. I appreciate you sharing my thoughts on community schools. Have a great day.

Tips for Telling your Community Schools' Story

- Include numbers – how many students does your community school serve? How many families? How many people does your community school employ beyond classroom/ school-day staff?
 - Include results – has attendance increased at your school? Have academic outcomes improved? Have disciplinary rates decreased? Has parent engagement increased, and/ or has school climate improve? IL's state school report cards can provide information you can use, <http://illinoisreportcard.com>, as can your 21st CCLC evaluations and those for other funders
 - Include a personal story – share how your community school has had a positive impact on an individual student or family.
 - Keep it brief – consider using bullet points to outline numbers and results.
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Keep the Federation for Community Schools Informed

Let the Federation know how your meeting/phone conversation went or what response you received from your email, letter, or fax. Be sure to include information on where your legislator stood on the issues you discussed.

Your participation gives the Federation valuable insight into the positions of members at the state and Federal levels and helps us identify strong supporters and those who need additional support or information. It also enables us to keep track of community school members who have good relationships with elected officials in the event that we need their support in the future. You can keep us updated by emailing Melissa Mitchell at Melissa@ilcommunityschools.org.

Sample Thank You Letter (After Visit/Phone Call)

The Honorable **(full name)**
(Room #) (Name) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative **(insert name)**:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me **(include date)** to talk about the importance of supporting community schools in Illinois and in your district **(include district number/area)**. As we discussed, and as I have witnessed firsthand community schools keep children and youth safe, increases academic achievement, and helps working families. **(Include any statistics/information about your community school/organization)**

I look forward to meeting with you again to further discuss the ways in which we can work together to ensure the ways in which we can work together to secure funding for community schools **(or include specific bill/issue discussed)** throughout the state.

Sincerely,

(Name, Last Name)
(Contact Information)