



VSBA

Virginia School Boards Association

Leadership • Advocacy • Support

Grassroots Advocacy Guide

A ToolKit for School Board
Members & Superintendents

2016 VSBA GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

Dear School Board Member/Superintendent:

The importance of advocacy and grassroots advocacy is a central component of VSBA and the government relations strategy of the association. It is key for board members to engage all stakeholders, including parents, business, community and higher education leaders, local organizations, and policy makers in the work of creating a successful public school system for their community. We must ensure that we have the resources, programs, and technology to successfully develop and educate the students of the 21st Century.

The VSBA Grassroots Advocacy Guide will give you the tools to help you customize your advocacy plan for your local school division by providing helpful tips, sample action plans, and informative white papers with talking points on three key topics: funding and flexibility, challenged schools, and access to technology and broadband internet.

Included in the Grassroots Advocacy Guide:

- An overview of VSBA Grassroots Advocacy
- Important questions to ask when developing your division's advocacy plan
- Sample Advocacy Action Plan
- Funding and Flexibility White Paper
- Challenged Schools White Paper
- Increased Access to Technology and Broadband Internet White Paper

Thank you in advance for your support in making VSBA's grassroots advocacy initiatives a success. Please contact Emily Webb, director of government relations, at 434-295-8722 or emily@vsba.org with any questions, comments or suggestions.

Sincerely,

Gina G. Patterson
Executive Director

Emily V. Webb
Director of Government Relations

OVERVIEW OF VSBA GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

What is the mission of VSBA grassroots advocacy?

The mission of our entire grassroots advocacy campaign is to build relationships, educate and positively influence the community, business and education leaders and policy makers.

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is informational and educational. It creates awareness and encourages crucial conversations about important topics that directly impact the community. Additionally, advocacy is a long-term, year-round and on-going effort. We need each and every one of you to help us advocate for public education, ensuring we have the infrastructure and resources necessary to educate the students of the 21st Century.

Who can we partner with to build key alliances?

We want to forge key alliances with organizations like the local chambers of commerce, parent-teacher associations, regional workforce and economic development councils, higher education leaders, local business leaders, community leaders and activists, and even the parents at the Saturday morning soccer game. Everyone you meet can be an ally, supporter and resource for public education.

What are the key priorities for grassroots advocacy?

Our grassroots advocacy efforts will focus on key issues, such as challenged schools, additional funding and funding flexibility, and increased access to broadband. All of these issues have significant impact statewide, but we encourage you to discuss other challenges impacting your region or local school division.

What are potential advocacy activities?

- Coffee meeting with local chamber president
- Letter to the editor highlighting successes of your schools
- Inviting organizations to attend and present at Board meetings
- Lunch with your local community college president
- Presentation to your regional workforce council or economic development association
- Phone call with your local legislator
- Invitation to tour schools, attend school theater production or Friday night football game

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN DEVELOPING YOUR DIVISION'S ADVOCACY PLAN

- 1) What do you want?
 - Organize your thoughts and key points prior to the meeting. It's best to identify your top two key priorities that you want to highlight to ensure you get those priorities across.
- 2) Who can best deliver the message?
 - Do you have a previous relationship with this person? Maybe another board member knows this individual or organization best. Make sure to think about who may have the best relationship with the individual or organization to deliver the message.
- 3) What do they need to hear?
 - How can you make this information personal to the individual or organization? For instance, if you are speaking with a local economic development group- talk about your high graduation and college completion rates or how well your schools are doing preparing students for the workforce.
- 4) How do we get them to hear it?
 - Is the message best delivered as a presentation to the entire group or is it better to discuss one-on-one? Prior to scheduling your meeting think about the best format and structure to convey your message.
- 5) How do we begin?
 - Start by emailing or calling the individual or organization you want to meet with to discuss your priorities. Have a handful of dates that work best for you and the other board members who will attend the meeting with you.
 - The day of the meeting, be sure to carry information about the successes of your school division and any talking points you want to leave behind. The best place to start the conversation is with the successes of your division.
- 6) After the meeting, where do we go from here?
 - Be sure to follow-up after your meeting with a thank you note and any additional information they may need. Stay in regular contact as new information or initiatives come about in your division.

SAMPLE ADVOCACY ACTION PLAN

January – Call and visit your legislators while they are in Richmond. Continue to stay active and engaged in the legislative process. Update your business and community stakeholders on relevant issues to keep them engaged in the legislative session.

January/February – Come to the VSBA Capitol Conference to receive a full briefing on the budget and other legislative issues. Take time during the legislative reception or the lobby day to visit with your legislators and their staff.

April through June – Review the completed legislative session and discuss scheduling meetings, or inviting legislators to an event, during the legislative off-season. Use this time to get to know your legislators, follow-up on important issues, and most importantly show them your school division. Be sure to thank legislators for their support and key votes.

May through July – Take time in the off-season to engage partners beyond your typical stakeholder groups. Engage other business and community leaders to explore common ground and partnerships.

August – School is getting ready to start, have you made contact with your legislators? If not, this is the time to do so. Is there an open house at your schools that you could invite them to or the unveiling of a new program? Find an event or simply invite your legislators for coffee. Make contact now to talk in general terms about your school. Start laying the groundwork for future meetings where you will discuss specific initiatives or legislation.

October through December – Hot education issues for the upcoming legislation session are formalizing during this time. Take time to contact your legislators to convey your division's position on these hot topics.

November through January – Now that hot education issues are formalizing reach back out to your business and community partners to engage them on relevant topic areas. Encourage their support and ask them to contact legislators to show their support.

December – Utilize the time right before the legislative session to engage members in their home offices. Discuss your priorities and continue to be a resource to them.

FUNDING & FUNDING FLEXIBILITY

BACKGROUND

Article VIII of the Virginia Constitution established public education as a state responsibility. School boards work in partnership with the General Assembly, Board of Education, and local governing bodies to provide public education in the Commonwealth.

Recent changes to state funding formulas increasingly widen already significant gaps between the actual costs of services at the local level and the state's reimbursements for the provision of those services.

The VSBA urges policy makers and the General Assembly to annually study the Standards of Quality (SOQ) funding for public education and provide funding at a level that realistically reflects current practices in local school divisions.

The VSBA believes all mandated programs and services of education should be funded on the basis of realistic costs, more specifically the costs that are actually incurred by local school divisions to provide a high quality education, and the state should bear a fair share of those costs.

The state should increase SOQ funding, coming from general fund revenues, appropriated to elementary and secondary education. Full funding of the SOQ, without policy modifications to the formula, should be the goal.

WHAT ARE WE ASKING FOR?

We ask for your support of school divisions in securing full funding of the Standards of Quality including non-personal costs for inflation and opposing unfunded state and local mandates without the full state share of funding.

- For example, students are required to take a personal finance course but the Standards of Quality don't pay for an instructor to teach this course, thus resulting in an unfunded mandate.

We ask for your support in advocating for increased flexibility in local use of SOQ funding. Funding categories are often rigid and not reflective of differences among local needs. Increased flexibility would allow school divisions to move funds from one SOQ requirement category to another based on individual school needs.

- For example, if one school's third grade reading scores are below average but they have very few discipline issues, they would be able to hire an additional reading specialist in place of an assistant principal.

INCREASED ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY AND BROADBAND INTERNET

BACKGROUND

VSBA has made technology, virtual learning and broadband access a priority through the work of the VSBA Task Force on Virtual Learning. Virtual learning is no longer the future of education: it is happening now in schools across the Commonwealth. **Bringing broadband access to all schools is an investment in our students, our economy and our global competitiveness.** If our students are going to compete in the 21st Century global workforce, we must educate them differently. Instead of telling students to turn off technology when they enter the classroom, we must integrate technology into lessons where it can be used effectively to engage and motivate students.

Virtual and blended learning offers an opportunity to provide all children with a personalized and equitable education, if we can succeed in closing the education gap between those with technology and broadband access and those without access.

Educational technology is an important element of cost-effective quality public education. The VSBA supports continued research and development of learning technologies that are instructionally sound, cost effective, and improve student performance.

WHAT ARE WE ASKING FOR?

We encourage community leaders to educate the larger community on the technology and broadband access gaps in your division and the benefits of access, which include business and economic development and improved healthcare and education.

- For example, broadband can help facilitate medical care to underserved children through remote appointments with nurses and physicians, helping to reduce absences from the classroom and quality instruction time.

We ask for your support to encourage the General Assembly and Board of Education to assume a leadership role in developing a technology funding formula that will provide predictable and continuing revenue for the acquisition, maintenance and replacement of educational technology, and for support personnel to train and assist in the use of educational technology. Such funding should be sufficient to improve and enhance classroom instruction, to fulfill mandates for virtual instruction and online assessment, as well as to assist with the state and federally-mandated collection and reporting of student achievement and teacher quality data.

We ask for your support to encourage the Governor and the General Assembly continue the Educational Technology Grants Program and initiate other programs of assistance so that all local school divisions in the Commonwealth are able to develop and sustain adequate and equitable educational technology plans.

- For example, these grants can enable school divisions to update their technology infrastructure to allow for a 1-to-1 device ratio. Additionally, if students have equitable and sustained access to technology during their K-12 education, they will be better equipped to learn new technologies in the workplace and postsecondary education.

CHALLENGED SCHOOLS

BACKGROUND

VSBA has worked closely with local school divisions through the work of the Task Force for Schools in Challenging Environments to identify factors inhibiting success and potential solutions to improve student learning, family engagement, teacher quality, specialized training and access to funding and resources.

Families are the first and most influential teachers of their children. The academic achievement of all students is sustained and enhanced with quality programs and processes that promote the engagement of families in the academic lives of their children. **True family engagement that encourages real partnerships and family efficacy in student learning can assist in overcoming these barriers.**

The preparedness and effectiveness of teachers delivering instruction in challenged schools is critical to student and school success. Research indicates teachers in challenged schools typically encounter an extra set of challenges children bring with them into the schoolhouse. Preparing teachers for and supporting teachers in these environments is essential for student academic success.

Schools in challenging environments are often schools populated with students in high-poverty families and neighborhoods or faced with other challenges such as frequent mobility or homelessness. To combat these factors “specialized training” is essential for a variety of stakeholders to better understand the challenges facing these students. This training can help lead divisions to improved policies and practices that support academic success.

Virginia’s challenged schools are typically located in high poverty areas with vast unemployment and low per-capita family incomes. School Board members and leaders are often overwhelmed by the vast needs of not only the schools, but also the students themselves. **For students in challenging environment there is a vast resource gap that exists between students in poverty and those students not in poverty.**

The overall mission of the Task Force for Schools in Challenging Environment is to support success student learning and ensure students are prepared for the jobs of the 21st Century global workforce. To learn, children need to feel safe and supported. **A healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment enables students and teachers to learn in powerful ways.** Such an environment promotes innovation, inquiry, and ultimately student success.

WHAT ARE WE ASKING FOR?

Business & Community Leaders

- We encourage business and community leaders to advocate for high quality enrichment opportunities, coordinate community events to align with school activities and create opportunities to celebrate success outside of the typical school day.
- We encourage local businesses to sponsor teacher appreciation events to create stronger community ties and partnership and foster an ongoing dialogue with school leaders.
- We encourage business and community leaders to partner with challenged schools to look for ways to offer specialized training and professional development through financial and human capital resources.
- We encourage the community to develop programs that prevent barriers to basic student learning like nutritional, medical and dental needs.
- We encourage school divisions to engage business and community leaders in an ongoing discussion about the community vision for the schools with a focus on equity for all students.

Higher Education Leaders

- We encourage Virginia schools of education to evaluate the requirement of a 1 year in-classroom student teacher experience to provide a clearer understanding of the teaching in a class room for a full year.
- We encourage schools of education to explore the expansion of courses on techniques for teaching in challenging environments.
- We encourage school and university leaders to work together to create structures to provide college access and engagement programs as well as mentorship and internship opportunities.

General Assembly Members & Policy Makers

- We encourage the General Assembly to review and study the state funding formulas and look for ways to bridge resource gaps for challenged schools.
- We ask the General Assembly for increased local control of the school calendar and testing flexibility to allow school boards to make the best decisions for their schools and students.
- We ask the General Assembly to recognize and acknowledge the value of family engagement in education and provide the necessary framework for success including increased local control and flexibility to match resources with needs and demands.
- We ask the General Assembly to support funding of divisions committed to specialized training and professional development by approved vendors, offer additional SOQ flexibility to match resources with needs and demands, and expand funding to support broadband and technology infrastructure to close the technology resource gap between students in poverty and other students.
- We encourage the General Assembly to provide loan forgiveness and bonuses to high-quality teachers teaching in accredited with warning or denied accreditation schools.