

Understanding Advocacy

I. Michigan Government (refer to “Understanding MI Legislature”)

- A. As a state, we elect one Governor every 4 years, 38 Senators every 4 years and 110 State Representatives every 2 years.
- B. The Governor heads the state government and has the power to pass or reject (veto) bills, laws and the budget. The Governor creates the first proposal of the budget and then sends it to the Senate and House to make changes or to agree. When it comes back to the Governor, and she/he does not agree, it is sent back to the House and Senate until they can all compromise on an outcome that they all agree to.
- C. The House and Senate meet separately and ultimately have to agree on laws and the budget, which often involves negotiations between the two bodies of government in the form of committees.
- D. What is their job?
 - a. Represent the people
 - b. Pass laws
 - c. Balance the state budget
- E. Who are your current local legislators? Do you know if they are going to run again, make changes or if their terms are done?

II. What is advocacy?

- A. Definition: Working to influence legislators into making policy and financial decisions that are favorable to the programs and cause that we are dedicated to protecting and enhancing. It is often said “If you’re not at the table, you’re on the table”. If we do not advocate, it sends the message to our legislators that the general public is happy with their decisions or are not concerned. It is through education, encouragement and pressure that changes are made.
- B. The Role of the Parent Coalitions and GSPC’s in advocating: our ultimate goal is to become the people that the legislators come to for information about early childhood when they are making policy and financial decisions.

One of the main purposes of the Parent Coalitions is to advocate for our youngest learners by educating legislators and the general public about the importance of early childhood. Due to the dire financial situation in Michigan, a great deal of energy needs to be put into encouraging our legislators to support quality programs that already exist by protecting funding. When we look at advocating, the ultimate goal of the Parent Liaison, members of the Coalitions and GSC Directors/Coordinators is to become each legislator’s early childhood referent. This means that we want to become the people that legislators contact for information when making budget and policy decisions. We want to move away from being people who are consistently asking for money (although that is part of our job) into the professionals who can educate them about the importance of early childhood, data about brain development, the results of research, and the opinions of people who live and vote in Michigan.

In the next year, we also want to position ourselves so that we are a group that the candidates can use to educate voters about themselves as they go into the election process. We want to be an advocacy group that they want to work with - making it a

win/win situation. We want every legislator in Michigan to know who their county's Great Start Parent Liaison and Director are, who some of the parent members are, and what our main messages are as a whole group. These relationships are going to look different in every county, as some candidates will be running for election again, some will be running for the Senate when they had been in the House and some will be completely new to the political arena.

It is important that our legislators see that we understand the issues, have the data about our area, have supporters behind us, clout with other organizations, and knowledge about the legislative process and that we understand how decisions are made.

C. What is Lobbying?

ECIC and the Great Start Collaborative are "Non-profit organizations" and receive some tax benefits that companies who are in existence to make money do not. With that classification, there are some limitations to the way in which we approach and communicate with our legislators. Lobbying is a form of advocacy with the specific intention of influencing specific legislation or legislative proposals. Many special interest groups pay lobbyists to create relationships with government officials so that they will write legislation or vote against laws that would impact the financial outcome of a large company. For example, tobacco companies

What does this mean for us? In broad terms, because Parent Liaisons and GSC Directors are employees of non-profit organizations, we can not specifically ask our legislators to provide funding for a specific program. However, we can educate our Parent coalitions about proposed cuts or certain needs and suggest that they contact their legislators. This is why it is so important to have strong, educated, prepared Parent Coalition volunteers.

It is not uncommon for legislators to ask what programs we suggest that they eliminate in order to maintain programs that we feel are critical to early childhood. Don't get sucked into making suggestions on what to cut! The best way to respond to that is to say "I am not comfortable making those kinds of recommendations".

E. Don't forget that the legislators are only part of the audience!

It is important to understand that we are advocating about early childhood with BOTH the general public and the legislators. Therefore, a plan needs to be made to gather the support of other voters who will also communicate to our legislators that they are knowledgeable about the value of early childhood and support policy and funding decisions that positively impact our young children. Ultimately, without critical mass, we will not be able to be successful.

III. Budget and Elections in 2010.

A. The State Budget

1. Explain the way the budget process works (in broad strokes).
 - a. Governor writes a proposed budget
 - b. Sent to the Senate appropriations committee
 - c. Sent to the Senate for approval
 - d. Senate approves and sends to the House

- e. House makes changes or approves
 - f. Committee works to come to an agreement
 - g. Budget goes back to the Governor to approve or amend
2. What are the sources of funding for Early Childhood programs that all GSPC's need to understand? What are the most at stake that we need to understand?
 3. Quick explanation of funding issues like Proposal A, DHS funding, school-aid budget lines, property tax, sales tax, lottery how it all fits in.
 4. Where does ECIC/GSC/GSPC funding come from? How to position ourselves to maintain that funding before it is threatened. (Ensure that we are also making community impact!!!!)
- B. Elections
1. Primaries take place on August 3, 2010. Candidates of each political party will run against each other and the winner will represent that party in the final election on November 3, 2010. When you go to vote in a primary, you must vote for only one party (Democrat or Republican). For example, you can not vote Democrat for the Senate candidates and Republican for the Representatives.
 2. We want to educate the candidates while they are running for office, so that the elected person will arrive in Lansing already understanding the importance of EC. During elections, candidates are more likely to want our support and welcome the opportunities we can provide to give them exposure to potential voters. This is our opportunity to establish our credibility and power and their opportunity to form positive relationships with us. However, **we can not endorse a candidate!!!!** Although we will learn which legislators are friends to early childhood, we can not promote one candidate over another, because that would also be lobbying. However, we can provide public information from the responses to our surveys (including all candidates) and give all of the candidates an opportunity to participate in a public forum where some of the questions are about early childhood.
 3. Use the ECIC survey to gather their opinions on Early Childhood and publish this information widely
 4. Hold forums or debates in collaboration with other groups in your community are highly effective. (Begin to think about when you want to hold these events, finding a non-biased moderator, your location(s), the number of forums you want to do, who you will partner with etc.)
 5. How can the GSPC's get more people to vote?
 - a. help to register people to vote at different events
 - b. Investigate what groups worked to get citizens to the polls for the presidential elections and connect with them. Learn about services that can help people get to the polls and promote them.
 - c. Think of ways to make it easier for stay-at-home parents to vote – make polling places more family-friendly; educate people about times to avoid due to the long lines etc.
- C. Now is the time to prepare Coalition members for 1:1 meetings with all of the candidates!!

1. Decide with the GSC board in your county which local topics and issues you want to be educating legislative candidates and the county about. Look at the annual plans for both the GSPC and the GSC and read the community impact reports. Information will be coming from ECIC about state-wide messages, and the TA's in each area will help with this as well.
2. Educate parent coalition members about early childhood programs in your area. If your group doesn't know about them, invite people to speak at a meeting or send a couple of members to visit. Consider doing a bus tour with the Parent Coalition members to show them the diversity of your community. For example, talk about which districts have GSRP pre-school programs, where Head Start programs run, talk about immigration/migrant workers etc, teen pregnancy, physical and sexual abuse support in the areas and health care difficulties, etc. A great way to start is by asking your Collaborative members to help you coordinate this and possibly have them suggest board members from their organizations that might also benefit from such a tour. Ask for permission to take pictures that you can use in presentations or on your web site. Inviting legislative candidates along is also a great idea!!!
3. Plan out an outline for what you want to cover in your meetings with the legislators and assign people within your group who will be at the meeting to talk about the points that they are most knowledgeable about.
4. Think about who each member of the PC represents and who each of the GSC members represents. When you speak, you want the legislators to know that you are not just relaying the opinion of one person, but someone who is a member of many groups.
5. Research how your legislator voted in budget decisions and about amendments to bills regarding early childhood this past year. You can see the voting history at: www.michiganvotes.org. The ECIC staff is also happy to help you to locate this information.
6. It is important that the people and organizations that you are advocating for know that you are advocating for them and want you to be doing so! Talk to these various groups to let them know who we are and your plan for the year, and ask how they'd like to be involved. This is also a great way to learn more about the real issues and make sure that you are on the right track when talking about what is needed.
7. If you live in an area where your legislator is interested other issues and has been a bit cold on early childhood, is there a link that can be made between what your legislator is passionate about and early childhood? Look at ways in which you can help them draw lines of intersection between information that is to our benefit and their interest.
8. If you share a Senator with other counties, collaborate with that Coalition to have a coordinated message or to discuss the tactics that you are going to use. Before Star Power, it would help to find out if you will be meeting with them at the same time, and to organize which county will talk about what issue etc.

IV. How to communicate with legislators (see “Tips for Communicating with legislators” handout)

- A. Effective approaches– probably the best approach is a combination of communication strategies depending upon what the issue is, how your legislator tends to work, and how critical your legislator is to the particular process that you are interested in communicating about. It is also important to assess the comfort level of your staff and coalition when speaking and writing letters (tips on this will come from ECIC as needed).
1. Meet in person to discuss your concerns or to touch base about the upcoming year with your GSC Director and a couple of members of your coalition.
 2. Coordinate consistent contact from a variety of people (various perspectives over the long term, with a strategy of providing information and demonstrating the diversity of the people who support early childhood/GSC). Send letters, attend meetings where legislators will be, forward applicable articles etc.
 3. Send direct letters, using concise, good data from a select few people while they are making critical decisions.
 4. Bombardment in the form of phone calls, letters, postcards, signatures etc. This is useful when there is concern over a vote and you have an opportunity to get a large number of people in one place at one time. The danger in this is, if used too often, it will become a nuisance, and it lose its impact.

- B. Using the media to our advantage in getting the attention of the public and legislators

Use the kids!!! The media love them and are attracted to events where they are gathered!

Ex: Jackson County’s kids demonstrating outside of the coffee shop.

Look at media outlets outside of the large papers. What do people in each community read? In some communities, there is someone who writes about local issues in a different periodical, and is delivered free (in Berrien Co this is our “Mailmax”). This is often read by more people than the newspaper!!!

Talk to Superintendants and school board members – they also speak with legislators on a regular basis. Ask for permission and their help to get information out to schools through web sites and PTO communication and make sure that they know your agenda.

- C. Examples of what worked to keep funding for 2009/10
1. A focused, intensive effort aimed at maximizing the number of constituent contacts to legislators about support for funding early childhood programs in the budget.
 2. Significant local media attention centered around the impact proposed cuts would have on specific programs within communities.