

Tips for communicating with Legislators

Meeting in Person

If you are interested in having a meeting with your legislator, the best times to find them in their office in Lansing are Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, which are the days that the House and Senate meet. Occasionally, legislators will be able to see you if you simply walk into their office, but it is more efficient to call ahead and make an appointment. If you live near their home town, it is often easier to meet with them there on Monday or Friday instead of traveling to Lansing. If you are interested in speaking with your Senator, it is not uncommon for them to suggest that you meet with their field representative who aides them in their work. Quite often it is very productive to meet with these people, because the Senators count on them to help them make decisions – getting to know the field representative is always a good idea.

When you contact your legislator (or their Aide who may schedule their appointments) let them know what you wish to discuss when you make your appointment so that they are given a chance to prepare for a productive conversation as well. You can locate all of your legislator's contact information through a search at www.michigan.gov or look in the front of your telephone book under Government Listings.

Before your meeting, take the time to read some available background material or have a conversation with an advocate (like a Parent Liaison in your county) that is knowledgeable about the issue which concerns you. You do not need to know everything - the primary goal of your visit is to express your concern or to educate your legislator about early childhood. Make notes about the points that you would like to get across to refer to so that you cover everything that you want to in your meeting. If you have first-hand or expert knowledge, share it with the legislator. Do not expect that they are an expert on everything! Bring a copy of any data that you present for them to refer back to later. If you understand the issues involved as a result of personal knowledge or research, you will be of great assistance to the legislator. Most legislators have busy schedules, so a well-prepared meeting that stays focused will be appreciated (and they will be more likely to meet with you again in the future).

It is easy to get frustrated if your legislator does not mirror your passion for early childhood or outright disagrees with something that you say. Remaining calm and respectful is imperative – remember that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar! If you disagree, keeping a calm, reasonable attitude and having a set of well-prepared reasons for your position may change their minds on the issue. **It is generally advisable not to get into arguments which may trigger prejudices.** Keep in mind that you may not have all the facts on an issue or financial decision. Let legislators explain their views—listen without interrupting—they often have input from many resources to which you may not have access, such as fiscal agencies, state departments, other groups with expertise on the issue, and legislation from other states. Take a few notes about their comments, noting any questions they have. Give the answers you know, and offer to get answers to the other questions, if possible. Understanding their views of the facts and where they come from will help your organization develop counterarguments.

Follow up your meeting with an email or note thanking them for their time and briefly touch on points that you discussed for emphasis.

Letter Writing and E-Mail

While meeting face to face with your legislator is highly effective, time constraints and personal comfort level may make a letter or email message a more effective means of communication. Refer to your Legislator's web page at www.michigan.gov for their specific address or call the district office in your area to inquire about his or her preferred method for receiving communication from their constituents.

The following are some suggestions to keep in mind when you communicate in writing with your Legislators:

1. **Address your letter correctly**, including the formal titles and prefixes used when addressing elected officials. Use your legislator's full name and make sure that you have the correct spelling of their name.

For example:

STATE SENATOR:
The Honorable (full name)
State Senator
State Capitol
P.O. Box 12345
Lansing, MI 48909-7536

STATE REPRESENTATIVE:
The Honorable (full name)
State Representative
State Capitol
P.O. Box 23456
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

Dear Senator (last name):

Dear Representative (last name):

2. **Always include your full name and address** in your letter or email so that they can verify that you are a constituent in their district and they can easily reply to you.

3. **Write a letter in your own words**, not a form letter. Using a template is helpful, but adding your own thoughts or experiences gives your letter more credibility. Proof-read your letter or have someone else read it before you send it to make sure that your points are clear and direct. You want to ensure that your legislator understands the purpose of your letter and your desired outcome.

4. **Keep it brief.** A letter that stays around one page is easy to read and does not take a lot of time to read. With the volume of mail that Legislators receive, you want to make it as easy as possible for them to read your letter and identify the reason for your correspondence without losing their attention because it was too long.

5. **Make it personal.** Explain how funding cuts or program cuts are going to affect your family, community, profession or the future of children that you know. Letters that give personal stories about the impact of specific programs are what the Legislators remember and refer to when they are speaking to their colleagues and voting for or against budget cuts.

6. **Follow up!** Pay attention to how your Legislator voted or acknowledge quotes in the newspaper that were supportive (or not supportive) to Early Childhood. Legislators like to be thanked, so remember to write when you are pleased as well as disappointed! It is important for them to know that you are monitoring how they vote and what they say publically.