

Legislators *Do* Listen to Their Constituents

As former U.S. House Speaker Thomas “Tip” O’Neil always said, “All politics are local.” A letter, phone call, or personal contact with any legislative representative has a significant impact. Because many people have become apathetic when it comes to politics, those who take the time to contact their legislators have an even greater impact. Congress has responded to just such advocacy with the largest single increase for adult literacy ever. Act now to begin communicating with your U.S. senators and congressional representatives on literacy issues.

Whether you are a tutor, trainer, student, board member or staff member, you can become a more effective advocate for literacy. This article is intended to help you, not just in regard to Washington, but in a consistent manner at the local, state, and national levels. You’ll see that many forms of advocacy take very little effort, and the rewards are great. As one veteran literacy advocate put it regarding elected officials, “You’ve got to know them before you need them.”

You also want your legislators to know you, know your programs and services and, most importantly, know your volunteers and students. Then, when you advocate for literacy, your message will make a stronger impression on your congressional representatives.

Here are some ways to advocate effectively. Many require little more than remembering to do them.

- First and foremost, register and vote.
- If you have an occasion to talk with any of your elected officials on any topic, be sure to mention your involvement in literacy.
- Attend any open houses that your representatives may hold.
- Take five or 10 minutes to send a letter when legislation is pending. Phone calls, faxes, and e-mails work well, too. Briefly state the position you favor, and encourage legislators’ support. (Program managers can provide specific information to make writing easier, including a list of names and addresses of all area representatives, any bill numbers of legislation, and a brief description of the issues.
- If you are a program manager or literacy professional, you may be able to position yourself as a literacy expert, available for consultation by your legislators.
- Personal contact is best. Invite your representatives to visit your program, visit their offices with students, tutors and others, or invite them to attend a student- and tutor-recognition event.

- Use your newsletter to its fullest advantage. Put all of your elected officials on your newsletter mailing list. If you receive support from any representative, report it in your newsletter. Consider adding a regular advocacy column in each issue.
- Attend legislative sessions when at all possible.
- Say thanks for any and all support you receive from legislators. Let them know specifically what good has been done through their efforts.

This list is not exhaustive. Please let us know what works well for you in advocating for literacy. Call Mark Cass at (315) 422-9121 or send e-mail to mcass@proliteracy.org.

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