Get to Know Your Legislators
Organizing a Legislator Visit

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The election is over, and it is time once again for school librarians to get to know their newly elected lawmakers, or perhaps a reelected incumbent. Some of you may be thinking, Why? What do the newly elected officials have to do with me and the school library program (SLP)?

Whether you like it or not, everything has political implications, and school libraries are no exception. Our government controls mergers of major corporations that determine the price of books and digital resources, what constitutes free speech and freedom of information, the design of school library facilities, and even the width of aisles between book stacks, to name a few ways that government policy impacts libraries. Federal funds are often administered as “pass through” funds to state education agencies. These funding sources, such as the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), which are funds to states for library programs or competitive grants, may impact SLPs indirectly. Other federal funding is direct, such as the Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) program now included in the ESSA legislation that supports improving literacy for K–12 students in high-need schools and communities. Legislators need to know how important this funding is for students.

According to school library political advocate Stephanie Vance (2009)—a veteran of the Washington, D.C., political scene who has held positions as a lobbyist, grassroots consultant, and congressional aide—legislators are most motivated by what their local constituents/voters think and want. Therefore, the school librarian, as a student advocate, can serve as the voice for students, ensuring equitable access to resources and technology and students’ intellectual freedom. School librarians also model civic engagement and responsible citizenship by voting and building relationships with elected officials.

SCHEDULING A LEGISLATOR’S VISIT TO YOUR SCHOOL

Before seeking approval from your administrator, think about the purpose of the visit, such as the following:

- Touring a new or renovated library facility
- Judging or awarding a library-related student contest
- Talking to classes about the election process and/or how a law is passed
- Engaging in a student-conducted interview to post on the school’s website
- Celebrating the kick-off of a reading program or special event like Read Across America

In thinking about the purpose, decide who your invited guests should include. Involving influential school and community leaders subtly elevates your leadership and the role of the school library in educating students. Specific teachers, parents, PTA leaders, the library advisory committee, local business leaders, administrators, school board members, and a reporter from the local newspaper or TV station are among those you might consider. Maintain an email group list of these people in the event that the visit is postponed at the last minute (yes, this happens!).

Next, make sure you are contacting the office of the legislator who represents the district in which your school resides. State legislators who represent the school may not be the same as where you personally live. State legislators are easier to schedule than federal Congressmen and women simply due to the size of their constituencies. When you call the legislator’s office, find out if there is a protocol for requesting a school visit and a person in charge of scheduling, dates when the legislator will be in the district office (which is a better time to schedule a local visit), and typically how long the legislator allots for a school visit. Use these details to pitch the visit to your administrator(s), as he or she will have questions. However, keep in mind that there will be a lot of back and forth communication with the legislator’s office before dates and details are confirmed.
After getting approval from your administration, contact the public relations person in your district, if the school has one. This person can handle press releases and articles in the school newsletters, and may also handle the taking of photos.

**PREVISIT PREPARATIONS**

After initial conversations, email or fax the legislator’s office a one-page handout about your school, location, some demographics about the students and composition of the community, and info about the library collection and program. Don’t assume that the legislator knows these things. The legislator’s staff will appreciate this work, as it will save them time. Send a tentative agenda of activities, listing times for the “meet and greet” with invited guests, a brief tour of the library (conducted by a student), the agreed-upon program (class visit, event celebration, etc.), concluded by an informal time for conversation, coffee and a snack, and the all-important photo op. Include a list on the agenda of your invited guests. Legislators, like school administrators, do not like surprises and will appreciate knowing ahead of time who will be there.

If your district does not have a public relations person, contact the local newspaper and TV station to request coverage. Prepare a short press release and fax it a week or two prior to the event to the media outlet contact(s). This ensures that names are spelled correctly and the date and time are confirmed. Find out if someone will attend to cover the event or if they prefer to use your press release.

Prepare a brief packet of materials for the legislator that may include:

- A summary of what school librarians teach; students’ level of access to print, digital, and computing devices; a list of state resources that are being utilized (i.e., online databases or a union catalog that is maintained with state funds); and material the library has produced for parents on literacy. Don’t whine or complain; present factual information and prepare multiple packets to share with any press/guests who attend.

Also prepare two or three talking points to strategically work into the conversation, such as:

- Our school librarians work closely with the local public libraries with resources and summer reading programs. School librarians, however, also serve as teachers, teaching students not just how to find information but also how to analyze it, present and write about it, and build critical-thinking skills.

- Did you know that there is research suggesting that high school graduation rates are higher where there is an effective school library program with a teacher librarian (Coker, 2015)?

- Funding school library programs especially supports those students whose families cannot provide books and technologies at home, and our school has an 80% enrollment in the free and reduced federal lunch program.

A day or two prior to the visit, call the legislator’s office to double-check that there are no conflicts with the upcoming visit. Confirm time and place, the agenda, parking, and other details. Also, re-email your invited quests to remind them of the time and agenda.

**ADVICE FOR THE DAY OF THE VISIT**

- Despite your best planning, legislators’ schedules are always fraught with last minute issues, such as a hastily called-for vote on a bill. So always be prepared for a postponement.

- Designate some students to greet and escort the legislator to and from the library.

- Assign a photographer to take photos of invited guests, students, and you (following district policies about photographing students).

- Try to stick to the schedule, but go with the flow! Let your students be the spotlight.

**POSTVISIT ACTIVITIES**

Be sure to send emails or written thank you notes to the legislator and the guests who attended. Follow up on questions the legislator asked. Send the legislator’s office digital copies of the photos and where the photos are...
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


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posted. Don’t be surprised if the legislator also uses some of them in newsletters or on a website.

Follow the legislator’s Facebook page or other social media to keep informed on his/her stance on educational topics and bills. You have made the important face-to-face contact—now use it. As needed, email him/her on issues. Remind the legislator of the visit and then state your “ask” or position, providing the “expert on the ground” view. You are building a relationship by feeding the legislator valuable information from an informed insider. Yes, you are the expert!

Most people think that our elected officials know about education, schools, and libraries, but after you have met with enough of them, you will understand that they come from diverse backgrounds and have varied experiences. Most times, they don’t know what you know about schools, students, and libraries. You need to both inform and lead them to a deeper understanding of why SLPs are so important to the learning process and an educated citizenry. Remember, you are advocating for your students. You can do it!

For more information, refer to the author’s LibGuide at http://libraryschool.libguidescms.com/legislative.

REFERENCES