

# The Keys to Grassroots Lobbying: A Guide for School Administrators



*Prepared by the North Carolina Association of School Administrators*

## What Is Lobbying?

Lobbying is simply working to influence the decisions of policymakers by imparting information and sharing your position on an issue. Most of the information in this guide applies to influencing all policymakers but, for the sake of brevity, this guide is about lobbying members of the North Carolina General Assembly. There are ways to be effective, and there are ways to be totally ineffective. One thing to always remember is “Never Burn Bridges.” No issue is the last issue. Compromise is the name of the game. Keep the bridge intact for future issues. And be part of the solution, not part of the problem. You can make an impact on their final decisions, and the earlier that you get involved on an issue, the better.

## Why Should I Get Involved?

Even though NCASA has professional lobbyists representing school administrators in the halls of the General Assembly, the involvement of individual school administrators in our membership is crucial to the outcome of many issues affecting public schools and their personnel. The most effective lobbying is a two-tiered approach in which the association’s lobbyists and school administrators in our membership work together on education policy and funding issues. The NCASA staff maintains a constant presence in the legislature to provide a unified voice for all school administrators. NCASA members are legislators’ constituents and, therefore, can have a different influence on them. You speak for the people who voted the legislators into office and represent the public school leadership team from their own community. Legislators are usually most responsive to their constituents regardless of the issue. It is essential that the messages from both the NCASA member and staff are consistent.

## What Is the Process?

Legislative issues have many sources. They can come from the governor, legislators, lobbyists, agencies, organizations, individuals, ideas from other states, etc. Sometimes, legislative study committees send forward recommendations for laws as well. In this case, it is best to be part of the study committee process. Issues are usually offered in the form of House or Senate bills sponsored by one or more legislators. The leadership of the chamber where a bill originates sends the bill to a committee, where it can be debated, amended, defeated or approved. The committee chairman decides whether or not to place a bill on the calendar for consideration in the committee. If the bill survives the committee process, it goes to the “floor of the house of origin” or occasionally to another committee for further review and debate. Sometimes there is a “companion bill” with the same title and content going through the other chamber at the same time. Rarely do both chambers work on their version of the bill at the same time. After the bill passes either the House or Senate, then it goes through the same process in the other chamber. If it is changed there, it has to go back to the originating chamber for concurrence. If that does not happen, the bill can be sent to a conference committee of members from both chambers. The bill process is lengthy, and lobbyists must stay with the issue until it is finally ratified and either signed or vetoed by the governor. The final version of the bill frequently does not look like its original version, especially if it is a controversial issue requiring compromises for passage. There are many side roads that a bill can take, but most follow this route.

## ***The State Budget—A Special Bill***

The state budget changes every year and the changes are incorporated into one massive bill that ultimately gains approval only after a House and Senate conference committee work out the differences in their spending priorities. The changes are made primarily via an Expansion Budget. If no budget changes were made in a given year, there would still be a budget in the form of the Base Budget. The Expansion Budget starts with a budget that the governor “sends over” each year. The House and Senate then take turns initiating the budget bill process. The budget bill customarily also contains *provisions* which really are meant to spell out the details of budget items. However, it has become common practice to place significant changes to the law in the budget bill. Passage of a budget bill requires much committee work and compromise between the branches of government, the parties, the House and Senate to say nothing of all the lobbyists and special interest groups. The governor now has veto power, so the budget must suit his/her agenda as well. Since the \$7 billion earmarked for public schools make up roughly 35 percent of the annual state budget, NCASA lobbyists and members must pay careful attention to the budget bill process to get our funding priorities considered and approved in the final bill.

## **How Should I Contact My Legislators?**

By writing letters or emails, making phone calls or visiting legislators at home or in Raleigh, you help give NCASA and our members the strength in numbers necessary to help move our priorities for public schools through the legislative process. The best way to decide which form of communication to use with any legislator is to ask, since all have difference preferences. The important thing is to communicate with your legislators before you need their help on a particular legislative issue, since they will trust and respect you during future contacts on critical issues. **The key to effective communications with your legislators is to “Follow the three C’s” listed below:**



**Be Concise** -- In any form of contact with a legislator, it is important for you to be brief and direct, since their time and attention to any particular issue will be limited. As bills come up for consideration, explain specific issues at the appropriate time before key votes in a committee or on the House or Senate floor. It is also much better to contact the legislator with one or two issues at a time than to try to discuss a “laundry list” of issues.



**Be Correct** – It is important for you to know the pros and cons of any issue, a specific bill number and the role your legislator can play in working on a particular piece of legislation. This may require you to do some research before contacting a legislator or at least to get assistance from NCASA in preparing for the contact. Be sure to discuss the impact a particular bill will have on your school or school district, since this will help the legislator see this issue from a local perspective. Also, know whether the legislator is on the committee where a bill faces a vote or whether the legislator can help persuade others who are on a certain committee. Accuracy is essential in each of these areas, since providing incorrect information to your legislator can damage the trust and respect the legislator has for you as an education leader in your community.



**Be Courteous** – Your role is to explain, inform and persuade. It is not to attack, threaten or belittle regardless of how you are treated. Legislators should always be treated with courtesy and respect, regardless of the positions they favor. Remember, you may have their support on one issue and not on another. Do not “burn bridges” over one issue. Be sure to say “thank you,” regardless of the outcome.

## ***Personal Meetings***



**Make an appointment** if possible or you may wait interminably. Without an appointment, you may cause your legislator to miss some other commitment, which creates negative feelings rather than good will.



**Always introduce yourself** even at the second, third or fourth meeting. Don't put your legislator in an awkward position of having to ask your name or of bluffing his/her way through the whole meeting without calling you anything. Having a nametag with your title is always helpful. It also helps to know the name of your legislator's secretary.



**Get down to business quickly.** If there is more than one in the party, have a key spokesperson. This role may shift as the issue changes. Chat a little, but as quickly as possible tell your legislator why you are there and what you want him/her to do. It is a good idea to know your legislator and what his/her interests are so you can mention them or ask about something of particular interest to them. They appreciate that, just as you do. They might be key players in a certain legislative issue under consideration, and you need to be aware of this. Also, don't forget to LISTEN to their perspective on an issue, since that will tell you if the legislator supports your position or needs additional information or contacts by others.



**Be reasonable.** Make it easy for your legislator to vote with you by giving good reasons. Don't be argumentative. Don't win an argument and lose a vote. Don't threaten; instead, work on changing your legislator's mind if he or she does not support your position.



**Leave brief, concise material,** not an armload. If additional material is requested, follow up as promised promptly. Timing is very important in this process. Providing them with the information (tools) they need to defend your position is essential. Follow up your visit with a note or letter as a brief thank you and a brief reminder of your issues.



### ***Telephoning Your Legislators***

During the legislative session, telephone calls can be very helpful. Again, be sure you know the name of the legislator's clerk/secretary. Generally, the same rules follow as for a meeting. You will probably have to leave your number.

### ***Emailing Your Legislators***

All legislators have email, and most use it for brief messages. You can save a lot of time using this route for some issues. Legislative clerks check messages regularly as do some legislators. The structure of the addresses is consistent. An example: Rep. John Jones' address: John.Jones@ncleg.net



### ***Writing to Your Legislators***

Generally, legislators do not respond to form letters. It is better to compose the best letter in your own words to a specific legislator. Be brief, orderly, concise, clear and do not ramble. If extensive details seem necessary, provide them in an enclosure. The letter should include your identity, who you represent, the issue, your position, your phone, address, fax and email address. Be sure to say "thank you."

## ***Grassroots Lobbying Events***



Give your legislator(s) opportunities to speak at events at your school or in your school district during or between legislative sessions. They usually like the exposure as well as being able to talk about where they stand on issues.



Arrange for the legislator to attend appropriate meetings scheduled for his/her convenience. These meetings may include legislative breakfasts, lunches, dinners and receptions in which you invite your entire legislative delegation to interact with key personnel and board members in your school system. These events offer an excellent opportunity for educating your legislators about the main concerns you have on public school policy and funding issues and help turn them into advocates who can help.



Use every opportunity to demonstrate your interest by attending meetings at which your legislator is appearing and speaking.

## **Resources for NCASA Members** ***Legislative Leadership, Staff and Services***

General Assembly Switchboard	(919) 733-4111
Lieutenant Governor Dan Forest	(919) 733-7350
President Pro Tempore of the Senate, Sen. Phil Berger	(919) 733-5708
Speaker of the House, Rep. Tim Moore	(919) 733-3451
Principal Clerk, House	(919) 733-7760
Principal Clerk, Senate	(919) 733-7761
Printed Bills	(919) 733-5648
Legislative Library	(919) 733-7778
Legislative Office Building Library	(919) 733-9390

## ***Bill History or Status***

Legislative portion of the NCASA website: <http://www.ncasa.net/displaycommon.cfm?an=3>

North Carolina General Assembly website: [www.ncleg.net](http://www.ncleg.net)

## ***Legislative Updates***

Read the *NCASA Legislative Link* newsletter (distributed by email weekly during the legislative session) at: <http://ncasa.net/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=7>



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