



A Guide to State Advocacy

Background

- COPAA's goal is to expand the policy practice from federal to state, and build a network of volunteer state coordinators to engage in state level advocacy to further COPAA's policy priorities.
- Coordinators should identify **state** policy issues impacting children with disabilities and their families.
 - Examples: state legislation, changes to state regulations, the need for state legislation, (e.g. seclusion and restraint, burden of proof, etc.) or grassroots efforts of interest.
- Once an issue is identified, the next step is engaging in advocacy to influence the state policy.

This resource intends to provide basic information in what advocacy is and how any individual can engage in advocacy to influence local, state or federal policy.

What is Advocacy?

- Advocacy is **organized action** in support of an idea or cause.
- Advocacy is constituents **educating elected officials** on important issues.
- Advocacy is establishing **ongoing and trusting** relationships.
- Advocacy **is not** lobbying.

How Do I Advocate for a Cause?

1. Identify what matters to you and where you want to make a difference.

- Understand your personal experience as a parent, attorney and/or advocate is valuable to policymakers. You are a real constituent with expertise.
- Pinpoint your policy issue and determine whether to propose something new to support or oppose something already in development.
- Research the background of the issue and formulate a clear message – either for or against a proposed change.
- Prepare a one-page document that: outlines the issue, includes relevant facts and highlights why you propose, support or oppose it. Include your policy “asks.”
- If you have a personal story about this issue, consider sharing it on COPAA's website in the “Our Stories” section. To view this section, click here:
<http://www.copaa.org/?page=OurStories>

2. Do your research and identify the lawmakers with jurisdiction over your issue.

If you are advocating for a special education policy issue and want to contact a state legislator, research who is on the state education committee. Once you have identified

the key representatives and senators, request a meeting with them. You can also find their contact information to connect over email or regular mail.

You can find your local legislators via the following websites:

- County Officials: <http://explorer.naco.org/#>
- Local Officials: <https://www.usa.gov/local-governments>
- State Legislators: <https://www.congress.gov/state-legislature-websites>
- Your Governor: <https://www.usa.gov/state-governor>

3. Create partnerships/coalitions

Often, community problems or issues are too large and complex for any one person or organization to tackle. In these circumstances, forming a partnership with other allies or a coalition of organizations can be an effective strategy for creating the change you seek. Don't be afraid to reach out to people or groups you know share your concerns and interests. Keep in mind that too large of group may inhibit developing consensus and/or be harder to manage. COPAA nationally collaborates with the following groups, it may be beneficial to find state equivalents of these organizations to partner with:

- Alliance to Prevent Restraint, Aversive Interventions, and Seclusion (APRAIS)
- American Bar Association Section of Litigation Children's Rights Litigation Committee (CRLC)
- Center for Law and Education (CLE)
- Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD)
- Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC)
- Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
- The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS), Equity Coalition

4. Engage on Social Media

Social media is a cost-effective platform to help reach a broad audience of stakeholders. You can also use social media to target policymakers as you strive to garner their attention on our issue. Here are a few guidelines to using social media for advocacy. Remember, state coordinators cannot speak on behalf of COPAA unless prior approval is obtained and there is agreement on the speaking points.

- **Create Social Media Accounts.** Utilize social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to solidify your message and broaden your reach.
- **Follow COPAA Social Media Accounts.** This will help provide an understanding of COPAA's online presence and federal advocacy efforts.
Facebook: [Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, Inc.](#)
Twitter: [@COPAA](#)
- **Follow policymakers on various social media.** Understanding what your policymakers are saying on social media will help you refine the speaking points and messages you'll need to communicate with them on your issues. Pay attention and

track what they're working on, what kinds of things they like to talk/tweet about, and what their positions are. For example, research the bills that have been introduced by them that impact special education and/or how they have voted in past legislative sessions on these bills.

- **Use social media to establish relationships with members of the media.** Twitter is an especially effective way to connect with the press. Reporters have large followings, and they're always looking for a good story that expands their following. Use these relationships to tell your story and share good news and/or concerns with your community.
- **Warning – The Internet is Permanent.** Always remember to be respectful when engaging on the internet and remember that once you post something, it is out there forever.

5. Secure traditional media

Traditional media is also a great way to reach an audience and keep your issue in the minds of the public. When trying to get your story told by a reporter or by writing an op-ed of your own, there are a few guidelines to remember.

- Use a unique angle or voice – media outlets want something interesting and different. Use your unique perspective and voice to make your story stick. Think about:
 - Why the issue matters to your neighborhood, school or community.
 - What do the public and policymakers need to know.
 - What action they can take to create the change needed.
- Build a relationship – if you want your story told, it is important to take an interest in the work of the journalist you are going to be in contact with and not just use their platform as your personal loudspeaker.