



# Advocacy Tool Kit

2013-2014

*Advocates give a voice to the issues, people and principles they care about.*

*Your voice can make a difference!*

**School districts across New York are making devastating cuts to educational programs as they adjust to rising costs that are outpacing revenue.**

For some districts, that has meant lost jobs and reductions in the number of class sections, sports, extracurricular offerings, afterschool clubs and bus runs, enrichment opportunities, early learning programs, advanced courses, student support services, and more. In fact, many schools now face the very real threat of educational insolvency, when they will no longer be able to provide the

minimum requirements for students under New York State Education Department guidelines.

Continued reductions are not a viable long-term solution to fiscal challenges when today's students and teachers must meet higher performance standards than those for any previous generation. **This trend of reductions cannot continue without threatening the quality – and equality – of the education available to all students.**

Community advocates must speak up **now**, on behalf of their students and their schools, or risk losing the high level of local public education that they've come to expect. **Thank you for being an advocate who stands up for local public schools.**





## How can I make a difference for students?

Concerned citizens often wonder what they can do to help their local students and schools.

**The answer:** Complete one or more of the items on the Advocacy Checklist below. Then encourage friends and family to do the same.

### Advocacy Checklist

#### ▶ Empower yourself

- Choose an issue affecting your local schools and learn about that issue (*Action Step #1*).
- Hone and deliver a “laser talk” to someone about the issue you chose (*Action Step #2*).

#### ▶ Advocate with your legislators

- Send a letter or email to local legislators (*Action Step #3*).
- Establish a relationship with legislators’ aides (*Action Step #4*).
- Schedule face-to-face meetings with legislators, and ask them to take a leadership role on your selected issue (*Action Step #5*).
- Invite legislators to special events at schools.
- Ask questions at legislators’ town hall meetings.

#### ▶ Advocate through the media

- Write a letter to a newspaper editor and send your published letter to local legislators.
- Copy editorials or newspaper articles about your issue and send them to local legislators.

#### ▶ Advocate in the community

- Organize a letter-writing campaign.
- Speak to a local community group.
- Participate in a forum on your selected issue.
- Use social media to spread the word about what you’re advocating for:
  - Update your Facebook or Twitter status with a key point from your “laser talk.”
  - Share links to relevant news articles or to your school district website.
  - Invite people to participate in events that are related to your selected issue.
  - Follow legislators’ social media accounts. Use social media to connect with legislators.

### Tips for using social media to advocate

Family and friends use social media to stay in touch, but legislators also use it to connect with constituents. As a community advocate, you can tap into the power of social media to help spread the word about the challenges facing public schools.

#### Have a Facebook page?

- Search for and then “like” your local legislators’ Facebook pages. Visit these pages often to learn more about their legislative activities and interests.
- When a legislator’s Facebook post relates to education, be sure to “comment” on the post or “like” the post if you support it.
- “Share” the post on your own Facebook page to draw your friends’ attention to the legislator’s stance on education issues.

#### Have a Twitter feed?

- Search for and then “follow” your local legislators’ Twitter feeds so they appear on your Twitter “home” page.
- When a legislator tweets about education, “retweet” it with some comments on the issue. Your retweet will appear on your Twitter feed and on the “home” page of those who “follow” you.
- Send a tweet that includes the legislator’s Twitter handle so anyone who views “all” tweets related to the legislator will see your comments (e.g., I support @SenXYZ).
- Use hashtags in your tweets to encourage others to share a particular advocacy message (e.g., @NYGovCuomo: Schools are the key to the future for our kids and our state. Stand up for both and END the GEA now! #nyschoolsinperil).

## How can I be an advocate for my local schools?

### Action Step #1

#### Learn about the issues affecting your schools.

##### ► End the Gap Elimination Adjustment

**Challenge:** The Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) was introduced in 2010 as a way for the state government to close its budget deficit. It did so by spreading the funding shortfall around to all school districts through a GEA reduction to the overall Foundation Aid due to schools. New York schools have lost more than \$8 billion in promised school aid to the GEA.

Under the property tax levy limit or “cap,” less funded districts (with smaller annual budgets) are less able than wealthier districts (with larger annual budgets) to compensate for this loss of state aid by raising local revenue through school taxes.

**Solution:** Eliminating the GEA would help prevent further reductions in programs and services for students.

##### ► End the unfair distribution of state aid

**Challenge:** After a court order in 2003, New York adopted a new school finance formula that was meant to adjust for need and cost in each district. The Foundation Aid Formula was supposed to ensure a fairer, more predictable distribution of aid, but it has yet to be fully implemented.

The current state aid distribution system appears to distribute funds at least partly based on the philosophy of making sure every school district gets a share. In practice, this means well-funded districts in wealthier communities receive a level of state aid (allowing for expanded programs and services) that is disproportionate in terms of need when compared to less funded districts that would benefit more from the aid.

In September 2012, a report on school funding by the Center for American Progress found that New York has a “regressive” state aid distribution system where inequity in funding persists.

**Solution:** State aid should be distributed based on the actual cost of providing a sound basic education for every student in a way that fairly compensates for differences in community costs, needs and resources. This would allow school districts to provide equal educational opportunities for all students.

##### ► No new mandates without full funding

**Challenge:** The state and federal governments and the Board of Regents regularly create laws and regulations – known as mandates – that provide schools with guidance on daily operations. Schools in New York are subject to several hundred mandates, and districts that don’t adhere to them can lose money through lawsuits and the withdrawal of other aid funds.

Some estimates suggest that 76 percent of typical school district expenditures are either directly or indirectly related to meeting mandates, many of which are not fully funded. Of the 151 mandates that represent the greatest challenges to school districts in terms of financial burden and required time, 69 percent come with no funding (source: [www.p12.nysed.gov/fmis/mandaterelief](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/fmis/mandaterelief)).

For many districts, fulfilling all mandates while staying within a property tax levy limit has meant ongoing reductions in non-mandated programs and services for students as well as the loss of staff positions. As a result, well-intended mandates are now threatening many non-mandated, but higher priority items for local communities.

**Solution:** By ensuring that any new mandates come with full funding, the Legislature can avoid creating additional financial burdens for school districts.



Learn more about advocacy issues for schools by visiting [www.educationspeaks.org](http://www.educationspeaks.org)



## Action Step #2

### Develop a “laser talk.”

Deliver your messages more effectively by telling gripping stories in brief presentations known as “laser talks.”

#### ► Identify the **Problem**

In your laser talk, focus first on identifying a problem you want your listener to know about. Try to connect the problem to an issue the listener already cares about.

#### ► Present a **Solution**

Next, inform the listener about a solution to the problem you just presented. Give examples of how the solution would work and why it would be effective. You might cite a recent study or use other credible statistics.

#### ► Issue a call to **Action**

The final section of the laser talk is the call to action. Calls to action should be concrete, specific and include a “yes” or “no” question.

#### ► Work in a **personal story**

Try to include a compelling, personal story that expands on your laser talk.

## Action Step #3

### Write letters or send emails to your legislators.

Legislators often report that their inaction on an issue is simply because not enough people contacted them about it. Writing a letter or sending an email is a simple way to ensure your legislators know how you want to be represented. When writing a letter:

- Include the same points that you refined in your laser talk. The letter should include an introduction, problem statement, proposed solution, conclusion and call to action.
- Keep your letter short; a single page is best.
- Be concise and specific, but add a personal touch.

## Using your laser talk in a letter or email

Below is an example of how an effective advocate might use a laser talk in a letter or email to a legislator.

*Dear Senator XYZ,*

*I am a resident of the ABC School District. Thank you for your work on behalf of our schools last budget season. I hope you will continue that support this year by calling for the immediate elimination of the state’s Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) which is creating an unsustainable financial burden for local public schools.*

*In 2013-14, ABC School District saw an overall loss in funds of \$3.5 million as a result of the GEA. Since the program first began four years ago, the total GEA reduction in school aid for our district amounts to \$14 million. As a result of this loss in funds, 95 full-time equivalent positions have been eliminated throughout the district, leading to increased class sizes at all levels. In addition, the district has had to reduce funding to programs and services such as enrichment, foreign language, accelerated courses, athletics, and student clubs due to the GEA.*

*Our students’ education is suffering because of the lost opportunities. Soon, our graduates will no longer be competitive when they apply for colleges and jobs. My daughter will graduate next year, without having had access to enough advanced placement courses. She is a good student, but I am fearful that she will not be able to get into her preferred state college because her high school cannot offer more challenging courses.*

*At a time when our children are expected to achieve at higher levels than ever before, we cannot afford to dismantle our quality educational program. If the GEA continues, even more opportunities for students will be lost.*

*I urge you to seek the immediate elimination of the GEA and to please speak with your fellow legislators to take the steps necessary to ensure the GEA is no longer allowed to undercut quality education in New York. Thank you for your support.*

*Sincerely,*

*John D. Smith*

## Action Step #4

### Develop a relationship with your legislators' aides.

Sometimes knowing legislators' aides can be just as valuable as knowing the legislators. Aides often have a great deal of influence on the assembly members and senators for whom they work as well as more time to devote to your concerns. Try to build great relationships with these essential staff members.

## Action Step #5

### Meet face to face with your legislators.

Ideally, your first meeting with a legislator should be before a problem arises. It's also best to schedule a personal meeting in a legislator's local district office. Keep in mind these additional tips for an effective meeting:

- **Be on time.** Legislators have full schedules and may not be available if you arrive late.
- **Be concise.** Stick to your message, and expect no more than 15 minutes for a meeting.
- **Be flexible.** If your legislator is late or can't attend, convey the same message you had planned to deliver to the legislator's aide.
- **Be pleasant and appreciative.** Niceness and a bit of humor can make your visit memorable.
- **Be passionate, not emotional.** Emotional pleas often make others uncomfortable.
- **Be prepared.** Make sure you understand the arguments in opposition to your issue and have talking points prepared to combat them. Answer any questions your legislator may have and promise to follow up if you don't immediately have an answer available. Have some materials that are relevant to your issue to leave behind.
- **Be personal – about your issue.** Speak with passion about local children, local jobs, the local economy, local taxes, etc.

## Additional tools for interacting with your elected officials

Follow these tips to engage in productive, back-and-forth discussions with legislators, even when you don't agree on the issues.

- **Be brief.** Stick to your key points, and legislators will appreciate your respect for their busy schedules.
- **Be respectful, but also confident and direct.** A thoughtful discussion gives both sides an opportunity to come to an agreement, while a divisive argument makes both sides just want to win. So keep it civil while standing up for your beliefs.
- **Be clear and specific.** Let legislators know exactly what you want them to do (e.g., vote in favor of a bill, sponsor legislation) in a way that requires them to give you a "yes" or "no" response.
- **Be accurate.** Research your issue so you can answer legislators' questions. Promise to follow up on any question for which you don't immediately have an answer.
- **Be honest about your concerns.** Paint the real picture of your situation, even if it is scary. Share the ramifications for your community's schools and children. Use personal or compelling stories and facts.
- **Be timely and persistent.** If an issue has a deadline, make sure you give legislators enough time to respond to the issue. Regular reminders about the importance of the issue from multiple advocates can increase the likelihood that legislators will pay attention to the issue.