



## **THE ABC'S OF LEGISLATIVE VISITS: HOW TO HOST AN ELECTED OFFICIAL AT YOUR CENTER**

There is no better way to demonstrate the importance of early childhood education to legislative leadership than to personally invite them to see the learning that occurs on a daily basis in a variety of early care and education settings. This toolkit provides you with the resources to host an elected official at your center. The toolkit includes a number of useful steps, each broken into one or more levels (A, B, and C) to enable you to take it to the level that you feel you have the time and capacity to do.

**Level A: Level A**

**Level B: Level A+B**

**Level C: Levels A+B+C**

### **BACKGROUND WORK**

#### **STEP ONE: Know Your Legislator**

##### **LEVEL A**

Find out who represents you. For a listing of all of your elected officials, visit *Who Represents Me?* at <http://www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us/>.

##### **LEVEL B**

Research your legislator to get a better idea of his or her interests and how to connect them most effectively with the early childhood education field. The following questions can be a useful guide for understanding your legislator's background:

- What is their personal history?
- What issues are important to them?
- What committees do they serve on?
- What is their voting record, especially regarding early education legislation?
- Who supports this candidate by endorsing them or donating to their campaign?<sup>1</sup>

Utilize this information to show that you are familiar with their work and want to make this relationship mutually beneficial.

## **STEP TWO: Arrange the Visit**

### **Level A**

Contact your legislator's scheduler as soon as possible to discuss options for meetings. District and Capitol office contact information can be found at <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/>.

#### **TIPS for Arranging a Successful Visit:**

- Call the legislator's local (district) office first because it is generally easier to get the local scheduler's attention.
- Mention to the scheduler that community leaders and members of the press will be invited as well.
- Be respectful of your legislator's tight schedule and plan for no more than an hour visit- visits are often limited to about a half an hour.
- The morning hours are often more flexible so try for those times first.
- Express a clear purpose for the visit so legislative staff know how to prepare effectively.
- Point out that there will be opportunities for photos during the visit.

## **STEP THREE: Invitations**

### **Level A**

- Issue an invitation from the center or program director.
- Examples of documents to include with the invitation:
  - One Page Fact Sheet on the program or center brochure.
  - Take-home information that parents receive when they enroll their children.

### **Level B**

- In addition to a letter from the center or program director, formally invite the legislator with a letter from a prominent community leader.
- Send a letter from the children asking the legislator to join them for a specific activity, such as reading a book or circle time.

**TIP:** Communicate to the legislative office that the invitation from the children will be sent to the local media. If you need a list of local media outlets, please contact Don Titcombe, Communications Coordinator at TECEC: [dtitcombe@tecec.org](mailto:dtitcombe@tecec.org).

- Include in a packet of information to the legislator and the media:
  - Overview of early care and education programs in Texas (See **“Toolkit Supplementary Pieces”**).

### **Level C**

Take the children from the center on a field trip to the Capitol or district office to hand deliver an invitation to the event.

- Call the legislator's office in advance and say that the children would like to learn about where their legislator works. Once the children have seen where the legislator learns and works, they would like him/her to see where they learn and work, thereby making the visits reciprocal.
- Emphasize that this field trip is a learning experience for the children.
- Mention that you will be inviting the press to visit the legislator's office with you.
- After the visit, send a packet of information to the legislator with a book of pictures drawn by the children of their trip to the office along with an explanation of the link between experiencing an event, drawing that event and then verbally explaining the drawing as an exercise in literacy development (be sure to note that this kind of activity is evidence of a high quality early childhood program).

**TIP:** Be sure to review your program's rules and requirements for planning field trips.

## **STEP FOUR: Maximize Attention – Invite and Engage the Media**

### **Level A**

Invite local media outlets to attend the legislator's visit:

- Send out a press release to local media outlets (See <http://www.tecec.org/files/Sample%20Press%20Release.pdf>)
- Call local news and radio stations and newspapers to follow-up with the press release and ask to speak with the education or political correspondent or writer.
- Invite this individual to the visit and let them know who else will be in attendance as well.
- Ensure members of the media that there will be opportunities for photos during the visit.

### **Level B**

Create a press packet including:

- Overview sheet on early care and education programs in Texas (See <http://www.tecec.org/files/TexECE.pdf>)
- One Page Fact Sheet on center or program brochure.
- Cascading Effects of Enhanced Early Childhood Education and Development (See <http://www.tecec.org/files/Cascadex.pdf>)
- List of sources with contact information (i.e. visit coordinator, center or program director, teacher, and parent) in order for media to contact prior to the visit for a telephone interview.

Establish and foster relationships with specific members of the press:

- After contacting local media outlets, make frequent contact with specific reporters, especially newspaper writers, to further their knowledge base regarding early childhood care and development.
- Building this relationship will push the reporter to write a story on the visit, and has potential to lead to a continuous relationship that yields children's issues stories in the future.
- The legislative visit can serve as a way to connect the reporter to the advocacy community, which will further press coverage of important issues.

**TIP:** The media will most likely want to hear a teacher's perspective, so be sure to designate a teacher in advance to answer questions from the press. Take time before hand to think about the most significant issues around early education as experienced by teachers, centers, parents and children in Texas.

Help the press assist the general public get involved:

- Provide contact information for the center and a list of items needed to enhance the quality of service.
- Provide a list of volunteer opportunities available to the community.

## **STEP FIVE: Maximize Attention – Involve Community Leaders**

### **Level B**

Invite prominent business leaders in your community to attend the visit.

- City Council members, business owners, school administrators and faith or community organization leaders should be invited to increase the prominence of the event in the public's eye.
- Let invitees know that their presence is instrumental in communicating the importance of high quality early education experiences to the visiting legislator.
- Outline in advance how to frame the message that will be most effective in capturing business leaders' attention (See [http://www.tecec.org/pages.php/2008\\_PAC\\_May.html](http://www.tecec.org/pages.php/2008_PAC_May.html)).
- Use research on the link between quality early childhood experiences and economic development to enhance their connection to and interest in this issue. (See [http://www.tecec.org/pages.php/2008\\_PAC\\_May.html](http://www.tecec.org/pages.php/2008_PAC_May.html)).
- View our list of Tips for Engaging Business Leaders (See: [http://www.tecec.org/pages.php/2008\\_PAC\\_May.html](http://www.tecec.org/pages.php/2008_PAC_May.html)).

## **STEP SIX: Parental Involvement**

### **Level A**

- Send a letter home to parents explaining the purpose and particulars of the visit:

- Explain that the event is politically neutral,
- Note that children can be advocates for themselves,
- Emphasize the importance of basing practice and policy on research and data, rather than political motivation.
- Obtain image and/or name releases from parents of children in the class that will be hosting the visit to give to the press.
- Be available to meet with any parents who are concerned about the visit and keep an open mind during your conversation.
- If parents do not want their child to be involved with the legislative visit, have that child join another class for the morning.

## **INTERACTING WITH ONE ANOTHER**

### **STEP ONE: Interactions through Specific Activities**

#### **Level A**

- Bring the legislator to the children's level by providing a small chair around the table or in the circle around the edge of the rug.
- Have everyone introduce themselves at the beginning of the visit.
- If there is not space to accommodate all the members of the visiting group (i.e. legislative staff, community leaders, and so forth) around the table or rug, take the others on a tour of the facility and discuss in greater depth how the site functions and what additional supports are needed.

**TIP:** Be sure to create opportunities for interaction with the legislator and children. Eye contact and one-on-one or small group conversations are effective for imprinting the faces and needs of children in the minds of legislators as they move into the 81<sup>st</sup> session.

### **STEP TWO: Involve Additional Support**

#### **Level B**

Contact local early childhood education organizations such and seek their involvement in being on hand to answer questions about child development and early learning and/or the child care industry.

- Having this person on hand will relieve some of the pressure on the child care center staff to answer all press or legislator questions and will add weight to the importance of your message.

**STEP THREE: Involve Child Care Staff**

Use the legislative visit as an opportunity to involve child care center and program staff in the work of children’s advocacy.

**Level A**

- Engage staff in the process of coordinating the visit to tap their personal resources and provide a more in-depth look into advocacy work.
- Discuss with the center or program director the possibility of event participation to enhance advocacy skills-whether through organizing, leading a tour, creating documents, or another related activity-counting toward continuous training hours required by the state.

**COMMUNICATING YOUR MESSAGE**

**STEP ONE: The Big Picture**

**Level A**

- Provide talking points on the specific needs of your program or center and how it impacts the children and families in the legislator’s district.
- Provide TECEC Legislative Agenda for the 81<sup>st</sup> Session (You can access the legislative agenda on the TECEC website at <http://www.tecec.org>).

**TIPS:**

- Craft a message that the legislator can carry with them as they explore early childhood education issues in Texas that provides a broader view of what young children need in order to be successful.
- View your message as a way for the legislator to carry voices concerned with the welfare of children with them as they influence policy decisions.
- Outline your message as part of a broader goal for public policy as it relates to the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session.

**STEP TWO: Keep the Focus on the Children**

**Level A**

- Do not overload the legislator’s time in the center with a long presentation, but give them time to interact with the children.
- Designate the organizer of the visit and/or the program directors to answer any questions from the legislator or his/her staff members.

**Level B**

Identify and contact parents before the visit to be called upon by the press to answer questions or give quotes, and have their contact information on-hand at the visit.

**TIPS:**

- Parents receiving subsidies will be particularly helpful in communicating the needs of under-served children.
- Parents who pay full tuition will be able to describe why they believe that the center is effective.

**STEP THREE: Preparation for the Unexpected****Level A**

- If an issue is raised that you did not expect or are unprepared to answer, connect back to the key message(s) of the visits to drive your point(s) home.
- Neutralize potentially negative or distracting concerns with the same insistence on staying on message.
- Make sure that all adults involved in planning and leading the visit are speaking the same key message(s) so that the legislator can feel confident in knowing exactly what is needed.

**THANKING THE LEGISLATOR AND FOLLOWING UP****STEP ONE: Appreciation and Encouragement during the Visit****Level A**

- Thank the legislator and their staff for taking the time to visit, and if appropriate thank them for past support of children's issues.
- Communicate your desire to see them act on the behalf of children and that your political support will be there when they do so.

**STEP TWO: Maintain the Connection****Level A**

- Write a hand-written thank you letter to the legislator and include any information that they requested.
- Express your desire to maintain this relationship by keeping up with children's care and education issues.
- Ask to be informed about any action the legislator takes with regard to these issues.
- Encourage the legislator to return to the center at any time or get in touch with questions—in other words, communicate your desire to cultivate a working relationship.

**Level B**

- Throughout the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session, contact your legislator to thank them for certain actions they have taken and remind them of the needs of the center that they visited.

### **STEP THREE: Evaluate Effectiveness**

#### **Level A**

- After the visit, debrief with organizers, program directors, and other staff to discuss what went well, ideas for how to improve future visits and specific points to be communicated in the future based on this experience.
- Provide ideas and tools for staff to engage in next steps following the visit.

#### **Level B**

- Develop a plan for arranging future visits or involving the center in other advocacy efforts:
  - Consider asking legislators to join you for the opening of a new child care program or facility, thereby bringing the issue closer to their attention and more important to their public image.
  - Plan a breakfast meeting with local leaders in the early childhood education field (if possible, include pediatricians, health care professionals, teachers, school administrators, and so forth) and invite a legislator to participate in discussion of how best to meet the needs of young children in your community.

#### **Level C**

Connect with the larger community by writing an opinion-editorial in the local newspaper(s):

- Share the success of the visit with the community, and provide any tips or tools that you think made your visit particularly effective through an opinion-editorial submitted to your local newspaper.
- Spread the message that becoming involved with elected officials is something all members of the community can and should do.
- Be encouraging and offer to talk over strategies with anyone who would like to.

Brainstorm other ways to publicly recognize elected officials who act on behalf of children's issues

- Newsletters, community or organization listservers, or phone trees are great ways to spread the positive feedback that you have received from your legislator or ideas or suggestions for others organizing legislative visits in your community.
- Framed photos taken of the legislator with children and community members can be hung in prominent places in the center or on a banner outside to attract people's attention.

### **STEP FOUR: Celebrate your amazing success!**

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<sup>1</sup> Texans Care For Children. (2004). Building Relationships with legislators. Retrieved July 5, 2006, from [http://www.texanscareforchildren.org/files/A101\\_repsrelate.pdf](http://www.texanscareforchildren.org/files/A101_repsrelate.pdf).