

Corresponding With Your Members of Congress

Interaction between any elected official and his or her constituents is a crucial part of the democratic process. This is especially true for members of an advocacy organization such as the National PTA. PTA wants senators and representatives to know PTA members as a useful and knowledgeable resource when it comes to matters that concern the well-being of children. Building this relationship is done in a variety of ways, not the least of which is a regular correspondence between you and your member of Congress. Hearing the needs and concerns of their constituents is of the utmost importance to elected officials, as constituents are the ones who decide whether or not they remain in office.

When you decide to advocate on behalf of children, it is important to consider your audience. While it may be tempting to send out a mass e-mail or letter to all or many members of Congress, only the members who represent your district will respond to what you have to say. The PTA Takes Action Center at PTA.org/TakeAction can provide you with contact information for your members of Congress, should you need assistance.

**Note: If you are a state PTA President or President-Elect, a Federal Legislative Chair, or are otherwise representing your entire state PTA, you may contact any member of Congress from your state, regardless of whether you live in their district. You can call or e-mail them on behalf of the state PTA. However, if you choose to e-mail them, you will have to obtain their office e-mail address, as the website e-mail forms only accept mail from constituents. To find this e-mail address, you may use our Take Action site (PTA.org/TakeAction) or call the member's office directly and ask for the best address to send e-mail to. In this case, whether calling or e-mailing, you would want to use your PTA contact information so as to avoid confusion over constituency.*

Things to Remember when Corresponding with Your Members of Congress

- Always be polite and courteous. Members of Congress and their legislative staff are considerably less likely to respond to rude or profane letters.
- Be as concise as possible. Remember that each congressional office has dozens of legislative issues to cover and hundreds of constituent requests each day.
- Include your home or work address in every letter, even in e-mails.
- Thank the member of Congress for taking the time to read your letter.
- Remember that correspondence with any elected official is about building an ongoing relationship and persuading them to think of you as a resource. Even if an elected official does not agree with your point of view on an issue today, they might in the future.

Drafting Your Letter

After you have used the PTA Takes Action Center to find out who your Congressional representatives are, it's time to begin drafting your letter. It is generally not the members themselves that read constituent mail, but their legislative aides. These legislative aides receive hundreds of e-mails, phone calls, and letters every day regarding a wide array of policies, so it is important that your letter be as concise as possible in order to be effective. It is also helpful to use your own words and draft a unique letter for your correspondence with your elected official.

A one-page, three-paragraph letter is usually recommended. In your first paragraph, explain why you are writing, and identify yourself, and indicate your connection to PTA. In your second paragraph, provide more detail on the issue about which you are writing. If you are concerned about a certain bill, make sure to include the specific bill number (ex: *H.R. 1* or *S. 1*). When you write a letter, include relevant research, local data, and relevant personal stories that will effectively persuade your member of Congress to see your side of the issue. Finally, state what action you would like your member of Congress to take in the third paragraph. If you are requesting they vote Yes or No on an upcoming vote on a bill, then be direct and say so. Or, politely request that they direct their attention to matters relevant to PTA.

A sample letter can be found at the end of the document.

Emailing is Faster than Post Mail

E-mails are the most effective form of communication when advocating a Congressional office. Most Congressional offices now have standard e-mail forms that can be accessed right from the “Contact” tab of their website. Faxing a Congressional office is also an option, but is typically not the best or most timely way of getting your voice heard. Due to the security measures on Capitol Hill, a letter sent through the post can take between two and four weeks to reach a Congressional office. However, if you email that same letter, the office will receive it immediately. This is especially important when what you are advocating for is time sensitive, such as when you are asking a legislator to vote a certain way on an upcoming bill. If you mail the letter, they will likely receive it long after the vote has passed.

Because the member and his or her staff will only see your message on a computer screen and not in physical form like they would a faxed letter, make sure the important information contained in your e-mail jumps out at them. You can do this by putting the action you are requesting they take in the subject line (ex: *YES on H.R. 3*). By doing this, even if the member or his/her staff does not take the time to read your letter in its entirety, they will still have received the message that one of their constituents feels a certain way about an issue.

Calling Your Member of Congress

Calling your member of Congress is an effective way to advocate on behalf of children, especially when an important vote is coming up. As with other forms of communication between yourself and an elected official, members of Congress will only correspond with their own constituents out of professional courtesy to other members. Before you place your call, remember that it will not be the member of Congress answering the phone; it will most likely be a staff assistant or intern with whom you will speak.

**Note: As with writing to your members of Congress, if you are representing your entire state PTA, you may contact any member within your state.*

Make sure to prepare beforehand for your call. If there is a certain piece of legislation you would like the member of Congress to vote on, know what the specific number is (ex: *H.R. 2*). First, identify yourself as one of the member’s constituents. Second, explain to the staff member what it is you are calling about and what action you would like the member to take (ex: *voting Yes or No on a piece of legislation*). During your call, share any relevant research, data and stories that you might have with the staff member. This will go a long way in your relationship-building with your congressional office. You want them to think of you

as a resource when it comes to education issues. Also, try to illustrate the connection between the legislation being voted on in Washington and the effects it will have in your community. This will help bring the point home to the member and provide further encouragement for their office to take your requests and concerns seriously. Remember, they are there to represent you.

Thank the staff member for taking the time to talk with you. Because congressional offices are extremely busy, it is important to be as concise and brief as possible in order to be effective. While you might feel that explaining the minutiae of a bill to the staff member will be helpful, this will only frustrate whomever you are talking to and will likely not help your cause.

Another important reminder: be as congenial and polite as possible. Staff members are overwhelmed with angry phone calls, letters, and faxes on a daily basis; being pleasant and easy to talk to will go a long way in getting your voice heard. Additionally, be aware and respectful of the fact that the staff member may not have in-depth knowledge about the issue or specific legislation you are calling to discuss. There are thousands of bills introduced each Congress, so be mindful of this fact and do not be discouraged if they are not familiar with the issue or legislation.

A sample phone conversation can be found at the end of this document.

Afterwards

Keep National PTA Informed

Let National PTA know how your phone conversation went or what response you received from your e-mail. Be sure to include information on where your member of Congress stood on the issues you discussed. You can access an Advocacy Activity Form at <http://stateadvocacyfeedback.questionpro.com>. This gives PTA staff in Washington additional insight into the positions of members of Congress and helps us identify strong supporters and those who need additional attention or information, as well as PTA members who have good relationships that can be called upon in the future.

Sample Letter

The Honorable (full name)
(Room #) (Name) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative (insert name):

As a member of the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), (your state) PTA and your constituent, I would like to encourage you to support and co-sponsor the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2013. The Family Engagement in Education Act provides resources for schools and districts on best practices in engaging parents to raise student achievement, supports teachers and principals by providing professional development for educators on how to partner with parents to close the achievement gap, and builds statewide and local capacity to engage parents. [Insert information about how the Family Engagement in Education Act would serve families within your community].

Research demonstrates that when parents are engaged in their children's education, student achievement and graduation rates increase. When families are engaged, students are more likely to score higher on tests, earn higher grades, attend school regularly, have better social skills, demonstrate improved behavior, adapt well to school, graduate from high school on time, and pursue postsecondary education, regardless of their income level. Furthermore, recent research on school reform has demonstrated that meaningful family engagement is an essential component of successful and sustainable school turnaround reforms, as important as school leadership and curriculum alignment.

Additionally, studies show that engaging families is cost-effective; schools would have to spend more than \$1,000 dollars per pupil to get the same results. The Family Engagement in Education Act is also cost-effective; it puts forth a framework for systemic, integrated, and sustainable family engagement at all levels, allows flexibility and provides resources for local innovation and strategic partnership, without authorizing any new spending.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my concerns, and again I encourage you to increase funding for these important family engagement programs.

Sincerely:

(Insert name and address)

Sample Phone Conversation

Staff Member: Thank you for calling Congresswoman Smith's office, how may I help you?

Caller: Hello, My name is (your name) from (City and State) and I am calling on behalf of the National PTA/state PTA/local unit PTA.

Staff Member: Wonderful, what can I do for you?

Caller: As a concerned member of the Congresswoman's district, I support H.R. 2, which is being voted on this week, and I urge the Congresswoman to vote yes on this bill. (Insert information on why you support, in addition to why it is of concern to the member of Congress's constituents. But remember, be brief!)

Staff Member: Congressman Smith does not support H.R. 2, but thank you for sharing your concerns with us, and I will relay your comments on to the member of Congress.

Caller: Thank you for this information. I appreciate you sharing my thoughts, as I hope the Congresswoman may reconsider her position. Have a great day.



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