

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 think of PTA members as a useful 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 <http://capwiz.com/npta2/home/>, can provide you with contact information for your members of Congress, should you need assistance.

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. Letters and e-mail with no return address are likely to be disregarded.
- 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.

Faxing and Emailing is Faster than Snail Mail

Faxes and emails are an effective form of communication when advocating a Congressional office. Due to the heightened security measures on Capitol Hill, a letter can take between two and four weeks to reach a Congressional office. However, if you fax or email that same letter, the office will receive it immediately. This is especially important when what you are advocating for is time sensitive; the best example of this is when you are asking the member of Congress to vote a certain way on an upcoming bill. If you mailed the letter, they would likely receive it long after the vote has passed.

When you are faxing a letter to your congressional office, as with other forms of communication, remember to be as concise as possible. A staff member is not likely to read a four page letter in its entirety, but a straight-to-the-point three paragraph letter will prove to be very effective.

E-mailing a member of Congress is an especially easy and concise way to communicate with their office. Some e-mails can be as short as a single paragraph urging your member of Congress to vote a certain way or to advocate for a certain issue. Because they 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 what 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. By using PTA Takes Action Center you can email your members of Congress directly, using a PTA action alert on current legislative issues affecting the education, health and wellbeing of our children.

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 open and read constituent mail, but their legislative aides. These legislative aides receive hundreds of e-mails, phone calls, and letters everyday 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. While it might be easier to add your name to a form letter, they also tend to be less effective in attracting the member's attention to your issue.

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.

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 is not the member of Congress themselves answering the phone; it will most likely be a legislative staff member with whom you speak.

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 with 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 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.

Look at the sample phone conversation below between a PTA advocate like yourself and a congressional staff member to see how a phone call might go.

Sample Phone Conversation

Staff Member: Thank you for calling Congressman 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.

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

Caller: As a concerned member of the Congressman's district, I support H.R. 2 and would like know his position on this bill. (Feel free to insert any helpful information you might have at this time, in addition to why it is of concern to the member of Congress's constituents. But remember, *be brief!*)

Staff Member: Congressman Smith does support H.R. 2. Thank you for sharing your concerns with us, I will relay your comments on to the member of Congress.

Caller: Thank you, have a great day.



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) and your constituent, I would like to encourage you to increase funding for Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) to \$86 million. The PIRC program has recently undergone a substantial reorganization at the Department of Education to provide statewide leadership, technical assistance, and training to support effective family engagement. A substantial increase in funding to \$86 million for FY 2010 is needed to effectively implement the critical role of PIRC. From July 2007-June 2008, PIRCs assisted over 16 million parents, including almost 12 million low-income parents and 10 million parents with children who are limited-English-proficient (LEP). *[Insert information about how PIRCs serve families within your community].*

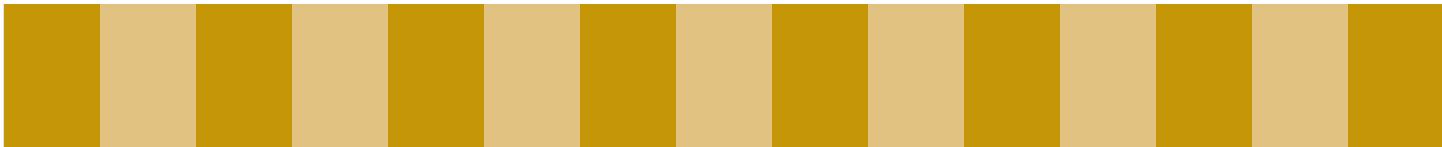
According to the Harvard Family Research Project's recent evaluation, PIRCs that reported outcomes showed that 76 percent improved parents' and teachers' knowledge and skills about how to enhance parental involvement in education. Research demonstrates that parental involvement in a child's education significantly raises student achievement, regardless of the parents' education level, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity. Parental involvement raises student achievement such that schools would need to increase spending by \$1000 per pupil to gain the same results. PIRCs and PTAs have recently undergone several innovate collaborations to increase family engagement and student achievement in several states. The details of these collaborations can be found here:

http://pta.org/IssueBrief-Model_Partnerships.pdf

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)



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