

Advocating with Your School Board



Just starting on your advocacy journey? It's not uncommon to feel nervous as you start this process, and your local school board is a common place to start. Local PTAs want school board members to know their PTA leaders and members as a useful and knowledgeable resource when it comes to matters that concern students and their school building. Developing this relationship is done in a variety of ways, not the least of which is a regular attendance at board of education meetings and developing an understanding of the role of an elected board of education member. Virtual board of education meetings makes it easier to become familiar with how your school board works and to stay aware of the issues they are dealing with.

When you need to advocate with your school board, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Public comments might only be allowed during a public comment period at the beginning of the meeting, not while an agenda item is being discussed. Be aware of how your school board handles public comments, as it can vary by school district.
- Public comments are likely to be limited by time, so know how long your school board allows someone to comment. Two or three minutes is common.
- Board members listen, but generally do not respond to public comments when they are made. They may ask a question to clarify the comment.
- If you are meeting with school board members to discuss your issue, it is probably best to do it one on one. When two or more school board members discuss a matter related to their position on the board (e.g., a school policy), it becomes a meeting subject to the Illinois Open Meetings Act. The Open Meetings Act requires an agenda posted 24 hours in advance and the meeting to be held in a public meeting place, among other requirements.

Using the School Board Public Comment Period Effectively

Because public comment time is limited to a couple of minutes, it is important to use this limited time wisely. If you have several points to make, it may be helpful to divide those points between different speakers. In those cases, you will still want to limit the number of speakers in the interest of time and make sure none of your comments overlap with what others are saying.

Here are some other tips on commenting at school board meetings:

Prepare/Research: Review your local unit PTA meeting minutes, PTA Council meeting minutes, and your Board of Education meeting minutes and website for information pertinent to your planned comments. Check the source of information that you have with information from your school district. School board policy requires transparency of information and reports and is an excellent resource for financial, academic, operations, human resources, communications, and board of education information. Check your district's public participation policy to know which part of the meeting agenda the public may speak during. It may be once or twice during the meeting and may have an "agenda item-only requirement" for one of the two public comment options.

Organize your thoughts: Outline your key points and start by explaining to the board members what you are there to speak about. Knowing exactly what you are there to praise/thank, ask for clarification, or share your disagreement about allows your listeners to focus on your entire message. Another way to organize your thoughts is to be honest about your level of comfort speaking publicly. Unless you are completely comfortable speaking “off the cuff” you should write your statement out and read it directly during the comment time. Having it printed out to make any last minute changes is easiest to do. If you use a tablet, iPad, or smartphone be sure to have it easily accessible. It is easy to lose your place when scrolling through the document so consider saving it as a PDF on your phone or tablet. Use a large font to make it easier to read.

Practice: Be sure to say your name to introduce yourself and the school you are associated with (if any—it’s okay if you’re just a taxpayer). Read your public comment aloud to hear it for yourself and to practice speaking slowly and emphasizing aspects of your message to match what you want them to truly hear. Do not raise your voice, use sarcasm, be dismissive of their role, denigrate members of the administration, or speak negatively about your school’s principal, administrators, faculty, or staff. If you have a problem related to a staff member, that issue should be raised in private with the principal of the school, with the Assistant Superintendent for that area, or the Superintendent once all avenues have been tried. Watch your time, and if you have only one or two sentences remaining, let the board president know to allow you to finish.