

Developing Your Message



Communication is at the core of your advocacy campaign—with your PTA members, with your potential supporters, and with your targets. While all of your messaging in your advocacy campaign will focus on your core issue, each audience will need a message tailored to their situation. Therefore, it is critical to take care in crafting your message.

Creating a Message Box

Once you have educated yourself on your issue (see *Researching Your Issue*) and laid out your campaign strategy (see *Planning Your Approach*), it is time to start crafting your message. A good first step is to create a “message box” that will help you prepare not only for what your PTA needs to say, but also how to respond to what your opposition may say. In creating the message box, you will need to fill in these four quadrants:

What PTA Says About the Issue	What Opposition Says About the Issue
What PTA Says About Opponent’s Position	What Opposition Says About PTA’s Position

Your completed message box should help frame all of your messaging during your campaign. A consistent message is essential. Your PTA members are likely to be tired of the message long before it begins to sink in with the decision makers and your community. Also keep in mind that the message box may need to be updated as your opposition crafts different arguments to your message, so your message may need to respond to those arguments, but still keep the consistent focus on your goal.

Creating a Message

In crafting your message, you may find it easiest to start with a long argument supporting your position or a list of talking points and then cutting it down to a focused message, an elevator pitch, and a hashtag. Conversely, you may find it easiest to come up with your elevator pitch message first and then adding supporting material to that message. Either way is a valid approach to building a message.

As you create your message, remember the Five C’s of Messaging:

1. **Clear:** Focus your message on 2 or 3 simple, easy to understand points that address the problem and your solution.
2. **Connect:** Make sure your message connects with your audience and your PTA’s values.
3. **Compelling:** Your message should make your audience care about the issue. Personal stories that illustrate the problem or how your solution has worked elsewhere can help make a compelling message.
4. **Concise:** Your targets are likely busy people, so make sure you put what you are asking them to do right at the beginning of your messages to them before adding supporting information.

- 5. Continual:** The old advertising adage was that you needed to get your product in front of a potential buyer seven times before they would be aware of it, and that was long before we became used to tuning out ads popping up all over the internet and in social media. So remember to keep your message consistent and keep it in front of your audience.

Framing Your Message

Framing your message simply means focusing on the problem in a specific way to highlight the need for change. Consider a picture of a busy café with some outdoor tables on the sidewalk taken. As such, it's just a random scene in a city. But if you zoom in, you may see a young couple holding hands at a table, an office worker rushing out the door with a take-out lunch, or a homeless person with a cardboard sign standing off to the side. Each of these scenes inside the big picture is a different way of framing it, and each tells a different story that creates different feelings in the viewer.

So when you think about framing your message, consider what stories you can tell about the issue you are advocating on. What stories highlight the problem? What stories illustrate a way to your solution? What stories will make your targets care about the issue?

With PTA advocacy, we often have the advantage of focusing on issues that involve children, and most people inherently want to help children. Think about how you can focus your advocacy message on how the issue affects a single child and how you can tell that child's story.

As an example, during the debate on changing Illinois's school funding formula to be more equitable, an NPR Illinois reporter took two students from a severely underfunded high school and two students from one of the highest funded high schools in the state and had them tour the two schools together. Towards the end of the story, one of the students from the underfunded school said, "They have classes like glass-blowing, and we don't even have art." There, in one line, was the entire argument over Illinois's need to address funding inequity framed in a single line from a student.

Different Types of Messages

Throughout your advocacy campaign, you are likely to need a variety of messages. While the message may be tailored to a specific audience, be sure to keep your advocacy goals front and center in every message. The types of messages you might need include:

- Messages to encourage your PTA members to take action
- Messages to raise awareness of and educate people about the issue
- Messages to decision makers to take the action you want
- Messages to counter opposition to your advocacy
- Messages to share your successes along the way towards your long-term goal to encourage more people to join your advocacy