

Educate, Advocate and Activate

This is Where the Battle is Won or Lost!

When all is said and done, there is absolutely no substitute for the kind of “grassroots” advocacy that educates and activates a legislator’s constituents to action. As we have seen, legislators almost always have an “ear to the ground” when it comes to issues their constituents are concerned with or feel strongly about. One of the primary goals of grassroots advocacy is to increase the level of knowledge about early childhood issues among the people of North Carolina and to motivate them to voice their views and opinions to their representatives.

The best way to achieve this is for legislators to hear from parents, children, grandparents, caregivers, and voters that young children matter. What follows is a list of effective strategies that can be employed to get the “kids count” message to legislators. All of them are designed to get legislators thinking more about early childhood issues and help them to see that there is broad based constituency support for their proposing good policy initiatives and supporting the Smart Start program.

Remember: Children can’t vote. It is up to us to stand up for them throughout the year to ensure that their needs are first on legislative agendas!

What Can You Do?

1. Meet with your Legislators

- Make an appointment ahead of time. Legislators are busy people with many demands on their time. If you show up at their offices unannounced you are likely to find them not in or unavailable. You also want to avoid the situation where a legislator tries to fit you into an already packed schedule. If you can’t make an appointment ahead of time, go to the legislator’s office and speak to his or her assistant. Tell them who you are and ask if there is any possibility of meeting with the legislator at some point later in the day.
- Designate a spokesperson.
- Have your notes ready.
- Make your case as clearly as possible, tell the legislator why you are interested in the issue and state clearly what you expect him or her to do.
- Thank the legislator for his or her time.
- Write a short letter thanking the legislator for their time and willingness to listen to you. A follow up letter also provides you with the opportunity to reiterate your position.

Effective Activities for Advocates

Find out who represents you

To find out who your House and Senate representatives are, visit www.ncleg.net Click on Representation at the top and then click on "Who Represents Me?" and enter your zip code.

Contact Your Legislators

It is very important to be in regular contact with your legislators and their staffs. Regular communication with them will make them more responsive to your requests. If you have not done so already, contact your legislators and introduce yourself. Do not overlook the staff. Be sure to provide staff with information on how to contact you, including your full name and address.

**REMEMBER TO SAY THANK YOU
BEFORE YOU SAY PLEASE!**

2. Start a Letter Writing or Postcard Campaign

(see appendix for a sample letter and specifics on a Take Five postcard campaign)

Encourage parents, children, members of your congregation and community to write a note about how Smart Start has helped them and send it to your elected officials.

- Create and circulate a list of the addresses, fax and phone numbers and email addresses of local legislators.
- Distribute this list to early childhood advocates, child care centers and congregations.

Letterwriting Tips:

- Use stationary if possible. Typed letters are easier to read than ones that are handwritten but a clear, easy to read hand written letter is more personal.
- Make sure that a return address is included in the letter.
- Be sure to identify yourself, your place of residence, and the particular issue or bill you are interested in.

- Be specific, factual, and state the evidence for your position.
- Refer to bills by name, number, and its status if you can. State clearly your position and what you expect the legislator to do.
- The letter should be no more than one typewritten page in length.

Mailing Address

To write, you can use one of two addresses:

The Honorable _____
North Carolina State Senate
North Carolina General Assembly
Raleigh, NC 27601-1096

The Honorable _____
North Carolina House of Representatives
North Carolina General Assembly
Raleigh, NC 27601-1096

Telephone your Legislator

Sometimes, a well-timed phone call to your legislator can make all the difference. Be sure to list the points you want to make before you call. When you call, state your name, where you live, your position, and ask to speak with your legislator. (Again, it helps tremendously to have already cultivated a relationship with the individual.) If you are able to speak with the legislator, try to be brief and to the point. Don't forget to thank the legislator for their time. If the legislator is unavailable, ask to leave a message with the clerk. Make sure you leave the bill number you are interested in and state your support or opposition to it before you hang up.

Send a Fax

To fax, call your representatives office and request the fax number. Representatives may also list their fax numbers on their websites. To find out, check out your representative's website at www.ncga.state.nc.us. Click on either House or Senate at the top and then click on Member Web Pages.

3. Become an E-Advocate for kids!

1. Emails are a quick and effective way to influence legislators. They are especially effective at crucial times in the legislative process: just before an important committee or floor vote. It is a great way to let legislators know that what they say and do in the next few hours is being watched by constituents with an interest in a specific piece of legislation. A complete list of email addresses is located in the back of this guide.

2. You may send a personal email or become an E-Advocate. Being an E-Advocate does not take much time or effort and means that your legislator will receive an email from you and others like you when an important bill or issue related to children is debated or voted upon. This form of communication is effective in conveying your message and letting your legislator know you are watching his or her action in the coming days or weeks.

How does E-Advocacy work? During the legislative session, you might receive an "alert" on your computer asking you to email a legislator or group of legislators that afternoon, evening or sometime the next day.

To become an "E-advocate" for children, simply send your name and email address to Tony Solari at agsolari@smartstart-nc.org.

4. Candidate and Business Leadership Pledges

- Generate a mailing list of legislators, business leaders, and members of the Chamber of Commerce.
- Draft a pledge that promises support for Smart Start or early childhood initiatives.
- Accompany each pledge with a cover letter that explains who you are, the purpose of the pledge and whether or how it will be shared with the public.

- Ask the legislator or business leader to sign the pledge.
- Publicize the existence of the pledge and encourage voters to ask legislators if they have signed it.

5. Promote Smart Start Support and Successes

There are many effective things you can do to let people know how much Smart Start helps children and parents in your community. There are many children and parents who benefit from the Smart Start program and do not even know it. Below is a list of the steps to take.

- Reach out to parents making use of other Smart Start funded programs like health screenings, immunizations, transportation services, child care subsidies, and child care centers. Ask them to contact their legislators and let them know what Smart Start means to them.
- If possible, find parents who are currently working because they were able - through Smart Start subsidies - to afford child care. Have these parents write or contact their legislators to let them know their views.
- Document Smart Start success stories and send them as human interest or community news items to your local newspaper, television, or radio station.

6. Engage Legislators

It is important to send legislators written invitations to any and all events. Even if they can't attend, the message will get across that early childhood issues are prominent on the public agenda. Below is a list of steps to take.

- Ask your state representatives to attend the opening of new child care facilities. Ask them to say a few words on the subject, or on the issue of child care in general.
- Ask legislators and business leaders to attend a “child watch” tour. These are very effective at eliciting support for early childhood issues. Contact the North Carolina Partnership for Children for information on how to organize a child watch tour.
- Organize a forum on child care issues in your county. Ask prominent early childhood activists and business leaders, parents, child care providers and state representatives to participate. The forum can be advertised in community bulletin boards on local newspapers, radio and television stations. Topics can include:
 - Child care availability and affordability
 - The impact of child care on quality of life issues.
 - Child care affordability and availability as an issue in attracting and retaining businesses and economic investment.
- Invite legislators and neighbors to an informal “coffee” at your home. Tell the legislator the gathering is an opportunity for him or her to get to know constituents and that you are interested in hearing their views on early childhood issues.

7. Show Off!

Ask your state representatives, business and faith leaders to visit your center, home or program. Organizing an open house or tour is a public awareness and advocacy initiative that moves community leaders, elected officials, clergy, and other community members out of their offices, boardrooms and legislative chambers and into the real world of children and families. By visiting sites throughout your county, the tour personalizes children and moves local leaders to action.

8. Organize A Forum

Follow the North Carolina Partnership for Children’s model for organizing a forum on child care issues in your county. Ask prominent early childhood activists, business leaders, parents, child care providers, faith community leaders and state representatives to participate. The forum can be advertised in community bulletin boards on local newspapers, radio and television stations. Topics include:

- The State of Children in your county.
- Child care availability and affordability.
- The impact of child care on quality of life issues.
- Child care affordability and availability as an issue in attracting and retaining businesses and economic investment.
- The importance of attracting and retaining child care workers and the importance of consistent, ongoing relationships to the well being of children.

9. Host a Coffee and Conversation

Invite legislators and neighbors to an informal “coffee and conversation” at your home. Tell the legislator the gathering is an opportunity for him or her to get to know constituents and that you are interested in hearing their views on early childhood issues.

10. Involve the Faith Community

Don’t overlook the faith community and your own congregation. Places of worship have always made a difference in the lives of children and families. Traditionally, many have offered youth community choirs, church sports teams, hiking and camping youth groups, as well as parent support groups. But increasingly, they’re doing more and places of worship house almost 1/3 of child-care programs today.

Additional Outreach Ideas

Audience	Outreach Ideas
Community, religious and business leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop local key contact list ■ Keep key contacts informed of upcoming events and recent accomplishments ■ Host forums, coffee hours, focus groups ■ Place information in local business/chamber publications ■ Partner in events
Legislators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Schedule an open house or visit with your legislators ■ Make one-on-one contact with business/civic champions ■ Send periodic mailings/emails when appropriate ■ Leave behind reminders of your visit
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Identify the reporters/contacts covering early childhood issues ■ Organize media tours of your organization or desk-siders with specific reporters ■ Keep a flow of information to media, but do not become a burden ■ Only send newsworthy information. Avoid “fluff”.
Child Advocates, Child Care Directors and Nonprofits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Keep contacts informed about upcoming events and recent accomplishments ■ Ask to be included in newsletters ■ Send periodic mailings when appropriate
General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop local speaker’s bureau to promote your topics ■ Participate in community fairs or special events ■ Share success stories through the media ■ Host open houses ■ Ask others to post your information on web