3 Steps to Build and Maintain Relationships with Elected Officials
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To impact and advance special/gifted education policy it is equally important to understand the process, and establish personal relationships with your elected officials and their staff.

Developing relationships with policymakers will yield positive outcomes in your advocacy and networking efforts.

Here are 3 steps you can take to establish and build your relationships with elected officials and their staff!

Find out who your elected officials are through CEC's Legislative Action Center!

1.) Questions to Consider

When thinking of ways to approach and relate to your elected officials, it is important to know some basic facts about them. Questions to consider include:

- Does s/he have a personal connection to special/gifted education?
- What is his/her professional background?
- What kind of constituency does your elected official represent - rural, urban, or suburban?
- What committees are they members of? Who/what influences them? What issues are their focus areas - labor, business, etc?
- What legislation has s/he introduced/co-sponsored?

2.) Establishing Relationships

**Access:** Introduce yourself to your elected officials and, very importantly, to their staff via email, phone call, or in-person visit! Share information about yourself: what you do, why you’re there, and resources that you can provide. Make an effort to attend Town Hall Meetings; schedule an in-person meeting with your local district office of your Members of Congress; and schedule a visit for a legislator to visit your program/school.
Support: You may not always agree with some of the policies your elected officials support but look for areas of common ground. Being respectful of other views is important; maybe there are some issues to work on together. If they are new to their role, welcome an opportunity to collaborate in the future.

Clarify: Talk with your official about what relevant policy issues that impact children and youth with exceptionalities and the professionals who work on their behalf. Discuss why your issue is important and how they can potentially assist you. And, don't forget to use CEC's Policy Team as a resource to help you identify timely special/gifted education policy issues.

Become a Resource: Because elected officials want to represent their constituents in the most effective way possible, come prepared with information they might find useful in order to understand a certain issue. Provide solid facts and figures (Read our CAN DO on credible data); do not assume they know everything on a specific issue. Show how you can help your elected official in communicating information to his or her constituents.

Be Clear and Honest: Do not be afraid to ask your elected official for support on something, as long as it is an appropriate request. Tell them exactly what kind of action you would like to see from them. And, if they ask you a question you do not know the answer to, don't be afraid to say that you will follow up with them (then, contact CEC's Policy team and we can help!).

3.) Maintaining Relationships

Now that you've taken the steps to meet and build a relationship with your elected official, now comes the challenge of maintaining that relationship:

- Invite your elected official to one of your own events where you might be speaking or an event that might be important for him or her to know about concerning a pressing policy issue.
- Follow up with your elected official. Keep them updated on what you're working on and any other useful updates they should know about.
- When they have been openly supportive, thank them quickly and publicly for their support. Publicize their support by submitting a Letter to the Editor to your local newspaper.
- Provide Regular communication, remind them that you're here and interested in maintaining a relationship.

More Resources!
Tips for Organizing a Successful Advocacy Phone Call
Tips for Organizing a Successful Advocacy Visit
The Legislative Process
Top 5 Advocacy Tips
Don't forget to visit the CEC-CAN Website for more information!
Remember that building and maintaining relationships is a two way street. If you are a resource for your elected official, then they are likely to be a resource for your advocacy activities!

If you have any questions, comments or concerns, please email me: Rose Haller-Kaplan, Program Assistant, Policy and Advocacy Services, at rosehk@cec.sped.org or give me a call at 703-264-9498.