

HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE

FIVE SIMPLE STEPS

Policy changes, whether they are statutory (state law) changes or regulatory (state agency) changes, occur for one of two reasons:

A. there is a problem so serious that everyone (the public, the media, members of the Legislature and state agency staff) all agree that change must occur; or

B. an individual or a group advocates for a change that is important to them.

Obviously the changes that Educational Diagnosticians would like to see in state law fall in the latter category. We can certainly argue that changing the statute to require Educational Diagnosticians to be certified is important for the school children of Texas, but this is not an issue that is going to make headlines in papers throughout the state. So what can you do to help your State Representative and State Senator understand that this change needs to occur?

1. Find out who represents you. Many people do not know this, much less have a relationship with their legislators. So the 1st step is to find out who these people are and learn a little something about them. That is easy to do, thanks to a great website: www.capitol.state.tx.us. Once you get to the website, on the left hand column, click on "Who Represents Me?" Type in your address and press enter. That will bring up a page that tells you who your U.S. Senators and Congressman are, as well as your State Senator, State Representative and State Board of Education member.

For purposes of this discussion, let's focus on your State Senator and Representative. Occasionally the form will show more than one person in each of these categories if you live very close to the boundary between two districts. If that happens, call one of the numbers provided and ask if they can help you determine if you live in that district.

Once you know who represents you, try to learn a little about them. The page that gives you their name, address and phone number will also give you a link to their home page where you can usually find a biography and can always learn what committees they serve on and what legislation they have filed in the past. You will feel more comfortable contacting them if you have some idea of their party affiliation, occupation, interests, etc.

2. Contact them. Pick up the phone and call for an appointment to go meet them. Face to face contact is always the best and now is the time to do this. The Legislature is not in session so they are in their home districts and have much more time now than when they are in session. (The Legislative Session begins on the 2nd Tuesday in January of odd-numbered years, so they will go in session on January 9, 2007.) Often if you wait until the session starts, you will have a harder time talking directly to your Senator or Representative due to the hectic nature of the Legislative Session.

3. What is the message? Initially you just want to inform them what an Educational Diagnostician is and what role you play in the school system. Explain this in simple terminology just as you would if you met someone at your kid's soccer game or were introducing yourself to a new neighbor. Do not use jargon or acronyms as they probably will not understand you and may be embarrassed to admit this.

Once you have established the groundwork, then explain that currently the state agency rules require certification of Educational Diagnosticians, but state law does not. Tell them that the Sunset Commission recommended that be changed in 2002 and 2004. It has not happened...not because there was any controversy over that recommendation, but because it was in Sunset bills that did not pass.

Before you leave, find out what is the best way to communicate with him or her. Some members love email while others never look at it. Some prefer phone calls. Others prefer letters. Also, ask if they have a staff person that focuses on education issues. Find out that person's name and contact information. Finally, offer to be a resource for them on public education issues and give him/her your business card.

4. Follow up. Write a thank you note. Do this on your personal stationary and be sure to once again include contact information.

5. Be consistent in your contactS. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. If your Senator and Representative hear from you one time and never again, you will be easy to ignore and eventually forget. You need to stay in touch. However, you do not want to always be asking for something. If you see an article in the paper that he/she has won an award (or their spouse or child did something great), cut it out and mail it to them with a short note of congratulations. If you read an article about some new educational program in another part of Texas or even in another state or country that you think should be in all Texas schools, send it with a not saying you thought they might be interested as you know they are committed to improving education in Texas. If they have an opponent in the November General Election, get involved in their campaign. That can be through offering to put a sign in your yard, volunteering to work on their phone bank or block walking efforts, making a donation, or organizing an opportunity for them to speak before a group of their constituents.

Legislators are just like you and me. They like people who like them and are interested in their activities. They want to help their constituents, but need to know a need exists and understand what that need is and why it is important. You can make that happen. Try it. It is an empowering experience to know that you have made a difference!!