

NORTH CAROLINA PTA

Advocacy Guide For NC PTA Members and Officers

Every Child ... One Voice

What Is Advocacy?

Advocacy is a constitutional right and a proud American tradition. It's the most important opportunity, after voting, that Americans have to be involved in their government. PTA is one of the nation's oldest and most successful advocacy organizations. PTA has been an advocate for children since 1897, and has always been at the forefront in supporting laws that benefit children. One PTA purpose is: "To secure adequate laws for the care and protection of children and youth."

The members of PTA in North Carolina, known as NC PTA, can help to fulfill that mission and help to brighten the future of every child. This guide is designed to help all NC PTA members, and all local units and councils of NC PTA, become advocates for NC PTA's mission, purposes and issues.

Does Advocacy Require Special Training?

No. Every NC PTA member can be an effective advocate for children. The best way to begin is to become active in your local school unit of NC PTA.

What Does NC PTA Advocate For?

NC PTA members study state and local education issues carefully, and NC PTA has endorsed several major goals and positions designed to improve schools for all children throughout North Carolina. Those goals and positions are on the NC PTA website (www.ncpta.org) in the document entitled "Where We Stand". By focusing on these major goals and positions in all its advocacy work, NC PTA can be most effective. Local units and councils of NC PTA also work on issues that are specific to their local schools.

How Does NC PTA Advocate For Children?

In many ways. Every day, NC PTA members advocate for children in schools, before local government agencies like school boards and county commissions, in the state legislature in Raleigh, and in the federal government in Washington. Every NC PTA member can find a place to advocate for children. NC PTA tries to provide the tools and information necessary to help members be effective advocates.

Does NC PTA Endorse And Support Political Candidates?

No, that is prohibited by our bylaws and by state and federal laws regulating nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations like NC PTA and its local units and councils.



***Can NC PTA And Its Local Units and Councils
Ask Candidates About Education Issues During Election Campaigns?***

Yes. NC PTA and its local units and councils may invite candidates to meetings where they can be questioned on issues, and where they can explain their own educational goals, but NC PTA and its local units and councils never support or endorse individual candidates for public office. If an event is planned, NC PTA and its local units and councils should invite all candidates running for the office or offices. NC PTA members, of course, are completely free to participate in election campaigns as individuals.

How Do I Become An Effective NC PTA Advocate?

Each NC PTA local unit or council should have a Legislative Chair, and they can help you get started. If you do not have a Legislative Chair, your local President or the NC PTA office in Raleigh can assist you. You may be interested in a particular issue in your child's school, or you may have a general interest in improving all schools in North Carolina. Wherever you choose to advocate for children, a few simple rules will serve you well:

Be Fearless. Never be concerned that you are an inexperienced advocate. All the best advocates once were inexperienced. You are a concerned citizen, parent and member of NC PTA, and these are the only credentials you need to be an advocate.

Be Helpful. Sometimes the best way to deal with an issue is to offer your help in solving it. This is part of the NC PTA tradition. We don't only ask public officials to fix things, we offer to help.

Be Informed. Learn everything you can about the issue that concerns you. The best advocates usually know more about an issue than the public official in charge. NC PTA provides a wealth of information about major education issues on its website (www.ncpta.org). At Leadership Training meetings every year, NC PTA informs leaders and members about important issues facing our public schools. Information on the dates and location of these meetings can be found on the NC PTA website or via your local unit president. All NC PTA members are encouraged to attend these training meetings. You can also sign up to receive regular emails on legislative matters and education issues. There are many links on the NC PTA website that will lead you to a wealth of information on education issues.

Be Civil. Even when issues are controversial or complicated, civility is a must. Tension and tempers never solve anything. Public officials, whether principals, superintendents, school board members or legislators, all deserve civility. Public officials instantly respect dedicated advocates who appreciate the value of civility.

Be Persistent. Public officials don't expect you to take no for an answer, and they respect persistence. Some of the most important goals take a long time to achieve.

Always Say Thank You. Just like Mom said. After a talk or meeting with an official, always thank them. Not only is this courteous, it will be easier to get the next appointment.

LOCAL NC PTA LEADERSHIP

The goal of the local unit/council Legislative Chair is to inform the membership about education issues and NC PTA legislative goals. Legislative Chairs can help the members become effective advocates. How this is achieved is up to each Legislative Chair. There are no set rules to follow but the following suggestions can be helpful (these are designed for advocacy directed at state legislators, but many of these suggestions will be equally helpful on the local level). All of these ideas are ways to get members involved, get them informed, and keep them active.

Communications.



NC PTA's strength is in "collective advocacy" or, in other words, members working in a coordinated way to achieve major goals. For that to work, Legislative Chairs have to educate members about NC PTA's legislative goals. Reviewing these goals at membership meetings is important. The local Legislative Chair and NC PTA can provide regular progress reports to members about the issues and goals of NC PTA as well as National PTA (National PTA regularly emails *What's Happening in Washington*, as an insert to the *Our Children* magazine, to all PTA presidents to keep them abreast of national issues). This will help keep members involved and enthusiastic.

During legislative sessions, the NC PTA Legislative Advocacy Commission may issue legislative "alerts" asking members to contact legislators about important legislation. Local Legislative Chairs can help explain the importance of these "alerts" to local members, and can help them contact legislators. NC PTA provides the names, addresses and phone numbers of all members of the General Assembly to every local unit and this information is available on the General Assembly's website at www.ncleg.net.

Communicating all this to members requires good membership lists and good contact information for every member. The Legislative Chair should develop the most effective means to communicate with members, and email should be used to the fullest extent possible because it is immediate and virtually free. Where members lack access to email, the Chair can use other communication methods such as phone trees, school newsletters and postcards.

Keeping Members Informed And Involved.

Legislative Chairs can help with this in several ways:

- Communicate with local members regularly regarding NC PTA activities and legislative goals;
- Help members understand where they can go for information, like the school websites, the National PTA website, the NC PTA website, and the many other websites listed on the NC PTA website;
- Hold regular meetings with local members to discuss legislative issues, and other children/youth concerns, and discuss with them how they can help improve schools;

- Take local members to school board meetings, and county commission meetings, when school issues are on the agenda, so they can see first-hand how the process works;
- Invite elected public officials to meetings where they can discuss, and be questioned on, their education positions. NC PTA's "Go To School Kit" for elected officials can be particularly helpful with this.

Help Members Use The NC PTA Website.

This website is now being updated. When that work is finished this fall, the site will provide a wealth of information on our schools that every NC PTA member will find invaluable. On the NC PTA website, members will find:

- NC PTA legislative goals with full explanations and background;
- Links to all the state agencies that are involved with public schools, including the State Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction, with minutes of their meetings, future meeting dates, etc.;
- Links to the website of local schools and local school systems;
- Contact information (phone, fax, email addresses) for all state legislators, local school boards, county commissioners, superintendents, and other public officials;
- Links to research organizations that can provide background on a wide variety of education issues;
- An outline of the construction needs of every school system in North Carolina;
- Explanations of NC's ABC accountability program and the federal No Child Left Behind Program;
- School funding information showing how NC schools are funded, and how some systems in NC are funded much better than others, and why;
- "Report Cards" showing the schools that are failing to provide children with a sound, basic education, according to the State;
- Updates on legislation pending in the General Assembly, and descriptions of major bills;
- Explanations of major educational developments, like the Leandro v. NC lawsuit in which the NC Supreme Court ruled that every child is entitled to an opportunity for a "sound, basic education";
- And much more.



The internet is creating dramatic new opportunities for advocacy organizations like NC PTA. Advocacy has always depended on information and communications, and the internet is making those available to everyone in ways unimaginable just a few years ago. NC PTA is putting those tools to work, and providing NC PTA members with the information they need to become effective advocates for children.

Public Events For Members.

The officers and committees of local units and councils can help facilitate interaction between local members and the officials responsible for public schools. Local units can invite appointed leaders like Superintendents and Principals to meet with members and discuss school issues, and the Legislative Chair can encourage members to become involved in their individual schools.

Regarding the elected officials --- county commissioners, school board members, state legislators --- local units can organize numerous events during election campaigns or at other times. NC PTA has prepared materials to assist local units and councils in organizing such meetings.

CONTACTING PUBLIC OFFICIALS

North Carolina Legislators

North Carolina laws, also known as statutes, are made by the General Assembly. The General Assembly is made up of two bodies: the 50-member Senate and the 120-member House of Representatives. Senators and Representatives both serve two-year terms representing their House or Senate District. They are elected in even-numbered years. They are “citizen legislators” who are usually employed in regular jobs, though they devote many months each year to the job of being a legislator.

The General Assembly meets in regular session beginning in January of each odd-numbered year; this session continues for about six months but may last longer as there is no fixed adjournment date. The General Assembly reconvenes for a shorter session, usually about two or three months, in the following even-numbered year.

Legislative Chairs provide current address lists for legislators to local members. Or, you may easily find out who is your state senator or state representative by going to the General Assembly’s website: www.ncleg.net or www.ncga.state.nc.us. Once you are at the General Assembly’s homepage, on the left side of the homepage, you will see a topic that is called “Citizen Guide” (it is under the “Site Navigation” section). Click on “Citizen Guide.” Once you are on the “Citizen Guide” page, click on the link for “Who Represents Me?” This “Representation” page allows you to search for your state senator and state representative by filing in either your county or zip code.

Once you determine who represents you, you can click on the name of any state senator or representative to view his or her website. These websites contain each individual senator and representative’s email address, phone numbers, addresses and occupation.

LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION

North Carolina General Assembly

The “Citizen Guide” page on the General Assembly’s website also has a link for “How an Idea Becomes Law.” This link provides basic information regarding the process a bill goes through before becoming a law.

To review a bill, or check on its status in the legislative process, members can just go to the General Assembly’s website, www.ncleg.net or www.ncga.state.nc.us. On the right side of the General Assembly’s homepage, you can type in a bill or statute number or type in a key word to find the bill you are looking for.

In addition to the website, you may also obtain a copy of a bill by sending a request to:

N.C. State Legislature
Printed Bills
Raleigh, NC 27611
(919) 733-5648

You may obtain additional bill information by sending your request to
N.C. Legislature
Legislative Library
Raleigh, NC 27611
(919) 733-7779

United States Senators and Representatives

The websites for the United States Senate and United States House of Representatives also contain helpful information regarding your national representatives. To find the name of your Representative, go to the House of Representatives' website, www.house.gov and click on the link for "Write Your Representative." To find the name of your Senators, go to the Senate website, www.senate.gov and click on "Find Your Senators."

Information on Federal Laws and Bills

If you wish to review a federal law or bill, you may go to the U.S. House of Representative's website, www.house.gov, and under "Legislative Information" click on "Find a Bill or Law." You may also go to the U.S. Senate website, www.senate.gov, and click on "Legislation and Records."

You may also obtain Federal bills and committee reports by writing to:

House Document Room
H-226 Capitol
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 225-3456

Senate Document Room
S-325
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-7860

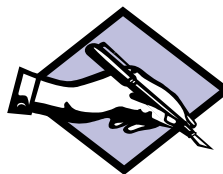


WRITING (or EMAILING) YOUR LEGISLATORS (state or national)

Form for address:

The Honorable (name)
(address)

Dear Senator or Representative (name):



Suggestions for content:

- When writing state or national legislators, clearly identify the issue or bill that you wish to support or oppose. Confine your comments to one subject.
- If writing or calling as the representative of an organization or coalition, make sure you have been authorized to do so. Otherwise, simply speak for yourself.
- Always sign your name or give your name when calling. Include your address and telephone number.
- Always keep a copy of your correspondence.
- Your representatives want to hear from you. It is also appropriate to address correspondence or to call a chair of a committee that is addressing the issue.
- Phone calls may be made directly to the legislator's home or office. Aides are most receptive to callers and will accept messages. You may not always get to speak with the legislator; however, many will return your call or answer your letter when their schedules permit.
- A spoken or written "thank you" for listening or considering is always appropriate whether they agree with you or not.

ADDRESSING LOCAL ISSUES

As discussed above, local concerns and issues that affect children also deserve your attention. When a local issue arises, the Legislative Chair and other local leaders should consider the following suggestions:

- First, clearly identify the issue. Does the issue fall under the NC PTA Purposes, Mission Statement, and Bylaws? If in doubt, contact the NC PTA Office. NC PTA has written position statements and resolutions on a multitude of issues and one might cover your issue and provide you with a much stronger base. If it is clear the issue falls within the NC PTA overall mission, it is appropriate to proceed.
- If you are uncertain about the best approach to take to deal with a particular issue, contact your NC PTA office. Your state leaders have been involved in many local issues over the years and can suggest various approaches.
- Consider calling a special meeting of your officers, Legislative Committee and other interested parties to discuss the issue, exchange information, and decide whether or not you want to proceed further.

- If you decide to take a position on the issue, and have confirmed that it is within the overall mission of NC PTA, the next steps can be very useful:
 1. Decide who is in a position to help you deal with the issue. Depending on the issue, this might be a principal, the Superintendent, the School Board or the County Commission.
 2. Select one or more of your local leaders or members to contact the appropriate individual or group, ask for a meeting to discuss the issue and find a solution. In addition to such meetings, you may decide it is necessary to request a formal opportunity to speak on the issue (for example, if the issue is one to be decided by the school board or the county commission). Depending on the issue, you may need to recruit speakers, either local NC PTA members or experts on the particular issue, who will speak on your behalf.
 3. If it is necessary to learn more about the issue, compile a list of the agencies and organizations that would have the necessary information and ask for volunteers to do the necessary research.
 4. If resolving this issue requires the support of your membership (for example, to persuade the school board to take a particular action), you will need to decide the best way to inform your members about the issue and urge them to take action. You may use email, phone trees, newsletters and other means of communication to do this. If you do this, you will need to provide your members with addresses, email addresses and phone numbers of the people who must be contacted (for example, the school board or county commissioners).
 5. To give your members the information they need to be effective advocates, carefully prepare an information sheet, which explains the issue and the solution that is supported by your local unit.
 6. Depending on the issue and how you decided to approach it, the committee might want to call a special parents' meeting or the information could be sent home by students or through the mail or email.
 7. If this is a major issue in the community, you may want to consider forming or joining a coalition of organizations that share your goal regarding this issue to unite for strength in addressing the issue.

NC PTA IS ON THE MARCH!
EVERY MEMBER CAN BE AN "ADVOCATE IN ACTION"

TO GIVE ALL CHILDREN
 THE SCHOOLS THEY DESERVE

3501 Glenwood Avenue
 Raleigh, NC 27612
 (919) 787-0534 or (800) 255-0417
www.ncpta.org