State Legislators
Who They Are and
How to Work With Them

A Guide for School Health Professionals

National Conference of State Legislatures
The Forum for America’s Ideas
State Legislators
Who They Are and
How to Work With Them

A Guide for School Health Professionals
The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the states, commonwealths and territories.

NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system. Its objectives are:

- To improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures.
- To promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- To ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

The Conference operates from offices in Denver, Colorado, and Washington, D.C.
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Why Should You Care About the State Legislature?

State legislators form opinions and vote on legislation that affects adolescents every year, including developing, overseeing and funding a wide range of adolescent school health programs. Even during times when other policy issues take precedence—for most states in 2010 that meant balancing the budget—lawmakers continue to take actions on a range of issues related to adolescent health, some of which are identified at right.

Because of the variety and complexity of the policy issues before them, state legislators often rely on their staff, researchers, experts in the field, lobbyists, practitioners and community members to gather information and develop policies that address a need or respond to an opportunity (such as new federal funds). Legislators have access to research through legislative staff or research organizations such as the National Conference of State Legislatures; however, they also rely on experts in the field—people like you—for information and first-hand perspectives about the effects of laws and public funding on adolescents.

This guide is designed to:

- Help school health professionals and administrators understand how state legislatures work and how state legislators gather information and develop policies related to adolescent health.
- Identify how people outside the state capitol—specifically, school health professionals—can communicate effectively with their elected leaders and provide constructive input through the legislative process.

On the Docket: Adolescent Health in 2010

State legislators considered a range of adolescent health legislation in 2010. Some of the bills addressed:

- Sexual health education
- Suicide prevention
- Teen dating violence prevention and intervention
- HPV vaccine requirements
- Mental health/substance abuse among teens in juvenile justice system
- Teen driving

State legislatures are vastly different from state to state, with variations in the number of legislative members and staff, time spent in session, legislative procedures, political make-up and so on. Despite these differences, however, the legislative process in general is similar across states. This section summarizes the basics of the legislative process, including how bills become laws and the people involved in the legislative process. It is important to know how the process works to communicate effectively with its participants!

Legislative Process. The legislative process—in theory—follows a predictable, rational path that goes something like this: 1) a legislator introduces a bill; 2) the bill is assigned to a committee; 3) committee holds public hearings;* 4) the committee acts on the bill (e.g., amends it, sends it to the full House or Senate for debate, or kills it); 5) legislators debate the bill’s merits, may amend it, and vote it up or down; 6) if it is approved, the bill then goes to the other chamber, where the process is repeated; 7) if the bill is amended during consideration by the second chamber, it goes to a conference committee to resolve differences between the two chambers; 8) the governor signs the bill and it becomes law; or 9) the governor vetoes the bill, after which the legislature may sustain or override the governor's veto.

How a Bill Becomes a Law

*Public hearings are the main point during this process where experts and practitioners like you may become involved. Experts and others often are asked to testify about the pros or cons of a bill, or to find people who can. People also participate by submitting written testimony or by contacting a legislator to express their opinion on the bill.
While these are the steps in every state (except Nebraska, which only has one chamber), the human factor is a significant part of the legislative process. “Missing from the preceding list of steps in the legislative game is the human equation,” Tommy Neal wrote in NCSL’s 2005 book, Learning the Game: How the Legislative Process Works. “State legislators come from all walks of life and bring with them a smorgasbord of priorities, agendas, alliances, personalities and biases.”

**Members and Staff**

Many professionals support and interact with legislators, and each has a specific role in the legislature.

- **Legislators:** The nation’s 7,382 state legislators were elected to represent the constituents in their districts. Legislators are policy generalists, not experts on most issues, although they may have expertise in one or more policy areas. Regardless, they vote on issues from A to Z—agriculture to zoning—and may benefit from your first-hand experience of working with young people. Certain legislators hold positions of authority within the legislature, including the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate (who is sometimes the lieutenant governor), the majority and minority floor leaders and whips, and committee and caucus chairs.

- **Legislative Staff:** Legislative staff members play important roles in the legislative process. Many legislatures, for example, employ a permanent, nonpartisan staff to provide research on specific legislation that may be considered during the legislative session. Some states have a separate research staff for each chamber, while others employ a single research staff. In addition, legislatures employ other staff members, including legal staff, librarians, and fiscal and personal staff, among others. In the 15 states with term limits, legislative staff have become the institutional memory.

- **Others in the Mix:** In addition to legislators and staff, various other people interact with state legislators, among them constituents, lobbyists, state agency officials, local governments and statewide associations.

**Rules of the Game**

Every state has formal rules that affect the process, including requirements about how many bills a legislator can introduce in a session, the deadline for introducing bills, and the process for assigning bills to a committee. Understanding the rules that govern the process in your state is critical, since they determine the timing and flow of bills through the legislative process. If you want to provide input on a specific bill before the Health and Human Services Committee, for example, you need to know when committee hearings take place and the rules for presenting testimony. While the process may seem cumbersome, the rules were designed to protect against a rush to judgment and ensure policies are reviewed by many people before going into effect.
The Importance of Elections

For school health professionals looking to communicate with legislators, the role of the 2010 election cannot be underestimated. In 2010, 6,117 of 7,382 state legislative seats nationwide are up for election. In the same election, 37 states will choose governors, the majority in races that are considered “open;” that is, with no incumbent running or where party control is questionable. The day after this or any election, people in the state legislature face new colleagues, shifts in the balance of power and executive priorities. Your strategies for communicating may need to change to fit new human or political realities. Furthermore, any work you did to educate legislative leaders, committee chairs or your own representative last year will need to be updated and repeated.

How Can I Learn About My Legislature?

Now that you understand the state legislature in general, it is important to understand the process and players in your own legislature. A good place to start is your state legislature’s website, which typically provides links to bills and laws, the state constitution, legislators’ home pages, press releases, daily events, term limits, state agencies and more. (NCSL maintains a clearinghouse of state legislature websites that provides Internet links to every state legislature.)

Questions to ask:
- Who is my state representative and/or state senator? Where do they stand on issues important to me?
- Who are the legislative leaders in my state?
- What agencies and staff serve the legislature in my state?
- What is the party makeup of my legislature?
- What is the legislative calendar in my state? What is the deadline for filing a bill?
- What is the process for public input during committee hearings?
- How can I find out the status of a bill or the committee to which it has been assigned?
How to Communicate Effectively with Legislators

Those who want to contribute information to the legislative process should understand the constraints that affect how legislators respond to public policy issues or proposals. Although there are many constraints, the good news is that most legislators see themselves as students. Adolescent health is often only a blip on the political radar, but you can be the “blip” enlarger! Challenges include the following.

- **Short learning curve.** About 20 percent of legislators are new each election, so it may be a challenge for them to learn about wide-ranging policy issues, budgets and legislative process in short order. In the 15 states with term limits, there may be few experienced fellow legislators with institutional memory and deep policy knowledge to share with new legislators. On the other hand, this need for education presents opportunities for people and organizations to share information on a wide range of policy topics.

- **Too few public resources.** In 2010, 49 states reported a collective state budget gap of $174 billion. Budget shortfalls leave little for discretionary programs when mandates such as Medicaid spending take priority. When communicating with state legislators, it therefore is important to highlight the economic dimensions of a proposal, specifically the costs and return on investment for state dollars.

- **Information Overload.** Legislators make decisions about dozens, sometimes hundreds, of policy topics each session. Within the health arena alone, the list of policy areas is staggering: overseeing and funding programs such as Medicaid, regulating health professions, and implementing federal health reform, are a few of the many areas.

**Information Overload: In Their Own Words**

“Going through all this information we have here is kind of like trying to drink from a fire hydrant.”
—Former Colorado Representative Mark Paschall

“I don’t need to know how to make the watch, I just need to know what time it is.”
—North Dakota Senator Judy Lee

“My seatmate told me this was a bad bill. I was going to vote no on it until I realized it was my own bill.”
—Former Colorado Senator Ray Powers

States and Term Limits

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>States with term limits</th>
<th>Term limits repealed</th>
<th>No term limits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>States with term limits</td>
<td>Term limits repealed</td>
<td>No term limits</td>
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State Budget Gaps FY 2002–FY 2013 (projected)

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount Before Budget Adoption</th>
<th>Amount After Fiscal Year Began</th>
<th>Projected Amount</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Includes Puerto Rico
** 31 states forecast FY 2012 gaps. The amount shown for FY 2011 indicates the 28 states that provided gap amounts.
*** 21 states forecast FY 2013 gaps. The amount shown for the FY 2012 indicates the 16 states that provided gap estimates.

Source: NCSL survey of state legislative fiscal offices, various years.
Four Strategies for Effective Communication

1. Establish Contact and/or a Relationship with Key Legislators

Identify the committees of jurisdiction and the legislators on these committees who have the greatest influence concerning adolescent and school health issues. This may be the committee chair, interested committee members, or perhaps even your own representative. Contact key legislators, meet with them, and identify yourself as a knowledgeable and dependable resource. In short, establish yourself as the “go to” person on adolescent and school health issues. In some states, the best way to reach legislators may be by building a relationship with key people on their staff. Follow up by contacting them periodically as a reminder that you are interested in being a resource. A good time to contact them, for example, might be on the heels of newly released data; you can help them interpret the data and discuss ways the legislature might address issues the data highlights.

If your professional capacity restricts you from such activities, consider making similar contact with your own organization’s government relations staff or other influential people who are allowed to contact legislators, or connecting with a community-based advocacy group to offer your expertise and assistance.

Keep in Mind:

- Get in early. An ideal time to meet with legislators is when they are not in session because they have more time for learning and connecting.
- Learn the budgeting process, from the governor to the legislature, and get in early there, too. The earlier programs you care about get into the budget, the more likely they are to remain there.
- Become legislators’ source for information. Above all, be trustworthy. Legislators do not like surprises.
- Cut to the chase with your information, make sure your facts are correct, be honest about the pros and cons of policies, and be responsive—legislators often need concise information fast.
2. **Network with Others**

As the adage goes, it’s not always what you know, but who you know that counts. Getting information into the hands of legislators may be more about the relationships you have—with the media, state agencies, foundations and other stakeholders—than your direct relationship with a legislator. Informing a network of individuals can efficiently and effectively raise awareness about a wide range of adolescent and school health issues.

The other adage to remember is that politics makes strange bedfellows. Adolescent and school health issues cross many jurisdictions and interest areas, among them education, health, mental health, human services, workforce development, criminal justice and transportation safety. One of the first questions a legislator will ask is, “Who is with you on this?” The broader your coalition, the more support a lawmaker can expect among his or her colleagues.

**Keep in Mind:**

- Build a network and speak as a group.
- Collaboration can be difficult. Agree to disagree, but come together on a couple of shared top issues and support those priorities with a common voice.
- Keep individuals and groups with similar interests apprised of your activities, even if they are not part of a formal collaboration. You may find additional areas where you can support each other if the lines of communication are open.
- Connect with people who have skills and expertise—e.g., in data analysis, communications, community-building or policy—that can help get your message across. Develop and maintain relationships through traditional means and newer social networking methods.
- Develop a system for communicating important information to your network. Provide information regularly about topics that matter to them, including new resources and school health publications, funding opportunities and adolescent issues in the press.
3. Raise Awareness Through Information and Resources

Why is education so fundamental? Because about one in five legislators is new to the legislature each election, and even experienced legislators need access to current data and objective analysis on rapidly changing issues. School health professionals can play a role in raising awareness about adolescent health issues. Legislators may be more approachable than you think. When they’re not at work in the state capitol, they interact with the community in various ways and often organize multiple venues for a “give and take” with their constituents—at town hall meetings, online blogs and conversations, and other means.

Another method to educate policymakers is to raise important issues with the people and organizations that legislators rely on for information, including legislative staff, researchers, the media, foundations and charitable organizations, state agencies, membership organizations and others. Legislative staff tend to be the keepers of vast amounts of knowledge in the legislature, especially in states with term limits. Be sure they know you are a knowledgeable, approachable person to whom they can turn for answers to questions that may arise. For state employees, this might mean ensuring that your government relations person knows your priorities and has your most recent data to share with legislators. Although this may seem one step removed, it may be an effective strategy, particularly if the information is coming from a trusted source for the legislator.

Keep in Mind:

- Prioritize the issues that are most critical to you and most relevant to the current environment. Avoid information overload!

- Make suggestions about topics that others with access could highlight for legislators. For example, consider identifying the hot topics of the day or explaining what new legislators need to know about today’s adolescent health issues. Or piggyback on major news events. What does data in your community say about the hot story?

- Let people know what information you have and what you can get. Keep it readily available and follow up promptly if they call. Establish rapport.

- Be persistent. Follow up and follow through over time.
4. **Frame Your Message**

At any given time, one or a small group of predominant issues or controlling ideas may be before the state legislature. In 2010, nearly every state is facing a budget shortfall; therefore, closing the gap in those states is often the filter through which legislators evaluate all proposals and funding requests. As a result, it is important to frame the message by addressing several key points, listed below.

- How does the issue affect individuals, families and businesses in the district and state (specifically what are the costs and benefits related to a specific program or bill)? What is the return on investment?

- What are best practices? Has a program or strategy been implemented elsewhere with positive results? Could it be replicated here?

- What are the consequences of not acting? In other words, would it cost the state millions of dollars if it does not adopt teen pregnancy prevention measures in high-risk communities?

- Would new efficiencies make programs more effective or less costly?

Consider the language or image you use to increase the odds that people will pay attention to your message. People bring their own experiences and frames of reference to bear, and the words or images you use can determine whether your audience will be open to the message or turn away from it. Creating receptive listeners requires that you pay attention to how you frame an issue so people feel that it benefits everyone. Ideally, messages should all align with “big ideas” or shared beliefs, such as responsibility, prevention or success. Many people have negative perceptions about teens. Focus groups have shown that adults often think teenagers are dangerous and self-absorbed and may feel they cannot relate to young people. Use your expertise as someone who works with young people to build bridges between the adult world and the teenage one.

**Keep in Mind:**

- Craft the message to the times. If the budget is the primary concern, frame the issue in terms of how much money it costs, where the money comes from and its return on investment.

- Make the message relevant. For example, strengthening graduated driver’s license laws are inexpensive, and preventing motor vehicle injuries and deaths offers huge cost savings.

- Address the effects on constituents and/or the district. Healthy and educated children and safe schools benefit everyone—youth, families, the community and the economy. Highlight how the issue strengthens families, communities and schools or promotes economic development in the area.

- Appeal to the parent/grandparent in people.

- Humanize the issue. Addressing the economic effect is important, but remember that legislators are parents, taxpayers and community members who respond to stories about kids and schools they know and care about.

- Leverage headlines and media coverage to communicate your message. In the wake of a school shooting, for example, legislators are receptive to solutions that will prevent future tragedies. Therefore, think about information and resources you have that could inform policymaking around that issue.
**Hitting the Mark:**

Elements of Effective Communication with Legislators

Pay attention to how information is presented to legislators. NCSL routinely surveys state legislators and staff about their preferred methods of communication. Because of time and resource constraints, legislators have distinct preferences for how they receive information.

- Information and analysis (in written or verbal form) should be unbiased and objective. Even if they already have taken a position, legislators want to know both sides of an issue so they are prepared to defend their position. This does not mean you have to present an opponent’s argument, but do not “hide” opposition where it exists or mislead legislators.

- Information should be concise and to the point. NCSL distributes a wide variety of publications (Web and paper), including articles, research reports, short issue briefs and postcards. While shorter is not always better, a postcard on childhood immunizations, for example, may be easier to read through than a longer, more in-depth report.

- Consider the best method for communicating information: e-mails, phone calls, letters, testimony at a committee hearing, and making information known through other channels (e.g., media, foundation newsletters, etc.)

- Put your information in context. While your issue might be of national significance, present how it specifically affects the people in your school or community.

- Use data wisely. Usually, two or three well-used statistics will suffice.

- Humanize the issues through anecdotes. Legislators rely on practitioners and others who work directly with youth to share the personal stories about individuals who might benefit from new policies.

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**For More Information**

- For more information on state legislatures and adolescent health issues, visit NCSL’s website: [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)
- Contact Megan Foreman at (303) 856-1401 or megan.foreman@ncsl.org