

# Making EE Heard in Wisconsin

## Communicating with Elected State Officials

Adapted from Kathie Crowley Conn of Nature Net: the environmental learning network

### Things to Keep in Mind when contacting your legislator:

- ▶ Legislators **want** and **need** to hear from you about important issues.
- ▶ A face-to-face contact has more impact than a letter. A meeting facilitates relationship-building. Find out your legislators hold "office hours" in your home district to make an appointment.
- ▶ A personal letter has more impact than a phone call. Form letters and petitions less impact. Letters allow you time to think over what you want to say and how to say it.
- ▶ An advantage of meetings and phone calls is that if the legislator or aide doesn't understand something you've said, you can explain it immediately.
- ▶ Whether you meet in person, write or call, keep it brief. Make your point quickly, clearly and simply, it will be absorbed and remembered.
- ▶ Personal examples are much more memorable than statistics. You do not have to be an expert on an issue to contact your legislator. Have a few statistics, examples or fact sheets available, in case they are asked for.
- ▶ Focus on only one or two issues at a time. Each legislator needs to know a little about hundreds of issues each session.
- ▶ Timing is important: If your contact is made too early in the process, it may be forgotten. Follow the progress of the bill and make contact with the right people at the right time.
- ▶ Know the up-to-date status of the bill.
- ▶ Build a relationship with your legislator now. Don't wait until there's a crisis to give him/her a call. Write a letter or attend a town meeting and speak about the importance of environmental education in your community.
- ▶ Be sure legislators are on your mailing list and invite them to your programs, events, and activities. **Give your legislator "in front of curtain" duties**, such as introducing a performance or presenting a scholarship at a student awards banquet. Give him/her a backstage tour, too!
- ▶ Get to know key **staff members and legislative aides**.
- ▶ Be aware of pending legislation that affects your organization, such as funding or services. (Sign up for the Legislature's Notification Service at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us>)
- ▶ **Partnering with other groups and constituencies shows there is community-wide support for environmental education.** Example partner groups: chamber of commerce, tourist bureau, parks and recreation department, library, museums, school district, and professional associations (Rotary, Kiwanis, etc.) charter schools, conservation clubs, UWEX, UW system.
- ▶ **Use letter-writing campaigns** with your partner groups to send messages to your elected officials on their personalized/business stationary. Keep the message simple and positive.

### You can find out who your representatives are by checking:

US Senate	<a href="http://www.senate.gov">www.senate.gov</a>
US House of Representatives	<a href="http://www.house.gov">www.house.gov</a>
State Government	<a href="http://www.ncsl.org/public/leglinks.cfm">www.ncsl.org/public/leglinks.cfm</a> or <a href="http://www.legis.state.(insert state's abbreviation).us">www.legis.state.(insert state's abbreviation).us</a>

## General protocol in all communications with your legislators

- ▶ Be courteous, friendly, brief and prepared.
- ▶ Be appreciative – of the legislator’s time, schedule, and the difficult job he/she has in not being able to please everyone.
- ▶ Be especially appreciative of the legislator’s support.
- ▶ Be reasonable. Remember there are always two sides (or more) to any given issue.
- ▶ Politics is compromise. Be firm and forceful, but realistic. Don’t be too critical.
- ▶ Don’t try to throw your weight around or be intimidating. It doesn’t work and is irritating.
- ▶ Tomorrow is another day. If we lose this vote, we’ll try harder to win the next one.
- ▶ Don’t scold, preach, lecture, or nit-pick.
- ▶ If you don’t know the answer, say so, **and then go get the answer.**
- ▶ Be a good listener. Give your elected official a meaningful opportunity to explain his/her position and why he/she may disagree with you.
- ▶ The most important words to remember next to “be courteous” are “follow-up.” If you send a letter, follow it up with a phone call. If you meet with a legislator, follow it up with a note.
- ▶ Humanize the message. Whenever possible, include anecdotal stories about how programs and public dollars affect REAL human beings.
- ▶ Send an informational packet about your organization, school, or community programming in advance of your visit along with your letter requesting an appointment. You’ll have a built-in conversation – starter! **Mention successful programs and services involving the environment and environmental education and the importance of increased funding at the state level.**
- ▶ **Consider leading an orientation briefing on state and local environmental education issues for your new legislators** inviting them to meet with EE and education leaders in your community, and discuss your concern for state and local funding support of environmental education.
- ▶ **Let your legislator know** if you receive funding from the National Environmental Education Foundation, National Science Foundation, or the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board and tell him/her about the many sources of public and private funding from foundations, corporations, and businesses that make it possible for you and your organization to serve your community. **Let your legislator know how you leverage funding from various sources to serve your constituents.**
- ▶ **You may want to discuss any innovative partnerships and collaborations** you have formed with other organizations in your community, such as schools and businesses, city or county government, chamber of commerce, downtown development association, or social services.
- ▶ **Be brief and be prepared.** Try to follow your legislator’s stance on issues regarding the environment and environmental education through print and electronic media.

### **Tips on personal visits**

- ▶ Call first to make an appointment. **Be punctual.**
- ▶ Dress appropriately. Treat this meeting as any other that requires a professional appearance.
- ▶ Be specific, brief and to the point. You can expect 15-20 minutes of time.
- ▶ Ask the elected official or aide what his or her position is and how they will vote.
- ▶ Give brief reasons why you believe the official should adopt the position you recommend. Have three or four key points clear in your mind. Writing them out beforehand will help.
- ▶ Research your legislator's positions on your issues.
- ▶ Your reasons the legislator should adopt your position should be framed in the legislator's own viewpoint, interests, and concern (i.e. legislative committees on which they serve). State why your position will benefit the elected official and his or her constituents.
- ▶ Be sure to get your concerns on the table before engaging on small talk.
- ▶ Leave the elected official with an issues-briefing paper, along with your business card.
- ▶ Follow up with a thank you note, in which you very briefly restate your position or request.

### **Tips on letter writing**

- ▶ Be brief, concise and stick with a single issue. Keep your letter to one page, although you could add a one-page fact sheet, newsletter article or other enclose.
- ▶ A (legible) hand-written letter is fine. Always sign by hand and print or type your name underneath.
- ▶ Some believe that a written letter gets more attention than an emailed version, however this is up to your individual legislator.
- ▶ Introduce yourself (mention the county and town or city where you live).
- ▶ State your reason for writing.
- ▶ Indicate the action you want taken and explain how that action will specifically benefit you and your community.
- ▶ Don't overlook any opportunity to send personal congratulatory messages or thank you notes for work an elected official has performed.
- ▶ Members of Congress and the State Legislature receive surprisingly few letters from their constituents. They pay a lot of attention to those they do receive.
- ▶ Use personal or business letterhead or else write your complete address on the letter.
- ▶ Identify your bill by number, if possible. Identify specific budget item specifically if possible.
- ▶ Identify yourself as a consumer, parent, educator, and explain how the issue personally affects you and the community.
- ▶ Say things in your own words and avoid sounding too much like a form letter.
- ▶ Ask for a specific response/action. Ask whether the person will draft a bill for you, vote for or against a bill, etc. If you don't ask the question, you'll get a very vague response thanking you for your input, but giving you no real information.
- ▶ Send thank you letters when your legislator votes as you have requested, or helps you in some way.
- ▶ DON'T use form letters or petitions. Legislators know most folks will sign a petition, but hardly anyone takes the time to write a letter. One personal letter has much more impact.
- ▶ While letters have the most visual impact other than face to face meetings, a phone call or e-mail is better than no contact at all!

**Example Letter:**

[Your Name]  
[Your Address]

Date

The Honorable [Name]  
PO Box [Number]  
City, State ZIP

Dear Senator/Representative [Name],

- 1. Say why you are writing**
- 2. Say something about the current situation**
- 3. Identify yourself**
- 4. Add a personal touch—your story here!**
- 5. An optional closing, re-stating your position**

Sincerely,

Your Signature & Name

Your District No. if you know it

**Tips on phone calls** Phoning is immediate, but may be the least effective way to get a message across to your legislators. Letters or face-to-face meetings have much more impact. Its lucky if you reach your legislator directly and more often than not will talk to a staff member. That said, phone calls are recommended when:

1. If there is no time for a letter: Often, you will only have one day's notice of a hearing or vote. In this case, you have to call.
2. If you are organizing a large number of people and you know they can't or won't write.

**Tips**

- ▶ Write down your key points to refer to as the phone conversation progresses. Practice what you are going to say.
- ▶ Be brief and concise. Limit your phone call to 2 minutes. Preparing a loose script helps.
- ▶ DO call your legislator's office directly. You can use the State Legislative Hotline's 800 number but you can't be sure your message gets through in time and you can get your questions answered or clarify your message. If you call the Congressional switchboard, they will transfer your call, but this takes more time (and money) than dialing direct.
- ▶ Clearly state your reason for calling, whether you are requesting support or opposition to a specific bill, specifically what action you wish taken, and what this action will accomplish. Give your name and address and member organization (WAEE), especially if you are a constituent.
- ▶ If the elected official is not available, ask to speak with the aide who works on the issue you want to discuss. Aides can often be extremely influential.
- ▶ Thank them for their time. Follow up with a letter restating your points and thanking the person for their time.