



Supporting Professionals and Promoting Quality

MnAEYC-MnSACA Advocacy Toolkit

Organizing a Site Visit for a Policymaker

Inviting legislators and candidates to visit your early care and education or out-of-school time program is a great way to start a long term relationship, and to help them experience childcare/after school care in the immediate and personal way you do every day. You are key in helping legislators understand the connection between high quality early education and after school care and school readiness, and the need for more resources to provide more high quality opportunities for more children and youth.

Below are suggested steps and a timeline, as well as sample invitations and a thank you letter.

Visit Planning

It is critical to plan a visit that reinforces the core message you want to relay.

What makes a good visit?

- The site is a high quality program, but has struggles with regard to resources, compensation, affordability, etc.
- There is an opportunity to interact with parents and children or youth, which will give a greater sense of urgency than just talking with administrators.
- Program staff is well prepared.
- The program serves a mix of children/youth and families. Visit programs that serve a diverse group of children. This will avoid generalizations about services only being needed by a specific group of people.
- A brief, well-planned presentation with ample opportunities for dialogue.

Message

It is critical to convey a message that transcends the specific site, so that the elected official(s) walks away with a greater understanding about local early care and education and out-of-school needs, not just a specific opinion about one program they visited. Use the time to share your successes and challenges. All written materials and staff must be “on message” in order to make sure the focus stays on:

1. The connection between the quality of a child’s early education experience and their school readiness or children and youth who regularly attend high-quality afterschool programs have better grades and conduct in school; more academic and enrichment opportunities; better peer relations and emotional adjustment and lower incidences of drug-use, violence, and pregnancy
2. The challenges that all programs face, i.e., attracting and retaining qualified staff, keeping tuition affordable for working families, having enough resources to operate quality programs.
3. The urgent need for greater state investments this year.

1

STEP

Find the work address and phone number for your elected officials.

The quickest and easiest way to find the legislators that represents where your program is located is to visit <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/districtfinder.aspx> and click “District Finder.” Once you reach the next page, insert your street address and zip code in the space provided. Then click on Search. A map of your legislative district and your state and federal representatives and senators will appear. You can click on any of their names to be taken to their webpages, where you will find their contact information. Or if you know who represents where your program is located you can: Find House and Senate members at <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/faq/faqtoc.aspx?id=47>

2

STEP

Identify a few dates when you could host a visit to your program.

Using the date that is most optimal for you, (plan for no longer than an hour of the legislator’s time) write an invitation letter based on the sample provided in this toolkit. Have the letter on hand when you call the office.

Call the official’s office.

Call the official’s office a month in advance. Tell the person who answers that you would like to schedule a time for the Senator or Representative to visit your early care and education or out-of-school time program.

Ask if the lawmaker can visit on the date that is optimal for you. If your first choice does not work, have options available for dates and times. Be sure to mention that staff and parents will be on hand for the visit and offer to invite media as well. Point out how your program relates to the policymaker’s interests (school readiness, healthy development, supporting work, literacy, improving academic achievement in public schools, keeping communities safe by decreasing juvenile crime, helping families, etc.). Tell them you will mail an “Invite Letter” and more information about the program and who will be at the visit. Encourage the policymaker to bring staff members.

Be flexible. If the lawmaker is not available, ask whether a staff person can visit instead. Even if the lawmaker agrees to come, keep in mind that elected officials’ schedules can change with little notice. Several days before the visit, call to confirm the event and be prepared to reschedule.

Mail or fax your personalized invitation letter (see sample). Be sure to send along a program profile, brochure, and background materials about your program.

3

STEP

Before the visit.

Identify parents, program staff, school officials and community partners who would be compelling spokespeople for your program. If you run an out-of-school time program, consider identifying a youth who can speak.

Ask them to be available for the visit and give them background material on the policymaker, so they will feel comfortable at the event. Share the basic schedule for the visit and clarify their roles.

Make sure to invite key partners, supporters, your school’s principal and even school board members. Send a media advisory to invite press and prepare a press release for the day of the event.

4

STEP

The day of the visit.

On the day of the visit, have someone wait outside the building to greet and direct the visitors to the right location. Be sure to have program brochures or a program profile on hand. You may want to make copies of any articles, youth essays, parent letters, awards or other documents that demonstrate community support for your program.

For out-of-school time programs, be sure the policymaker gets to hear from the young people at your program. Let him/her ask questions of the students or facilitate a discussion to get their perspectives on afterschool and what they gain from the program. Other ideas: ask parents to share their perspectives; ask a principal to talk about the ways the program affects students; ask a police officer, youth counselor, pediatrician or health leader talk about the benefits to youth who attend it; invite community members to comment on how the program keeps kids out of trouble.

For early care and education programs, be sure the policymaker gets to hear from parents who have a child(ren) in your program. Let the parent share how the program has been beneficial for him/her and his/her family. Let the policymaker ask questions of the parents and others present. If you can't answer their questions, tell them you'll get back to them and be sure to follow-up promptly. Other ideas: ask teachers and aides to provide their perspective; ask local business leaders to comment on how the program keeps his/her employees working.

Attendees can be brought closer to the issue through interactive experiences.

- For example, sitting in little chairs with children in structured time (such as breakfast or story time) or enjoying a snack with the youth and talking with them about their favorite parts of the program can be effective.
- If all visitors cannot be seated with the children/youth, take part of the group on a tour of the facility before bringing them back to interact with the children and youth.

Be prepared for the legislator and/or staff to be running late. Be flexible and respectful of their time. Be sure to have a camera handy, along with an experienced photographer to operate it.

After showing them your program and sharing the challenges involved in delivering high quality learning opportunities with so few resources, ask the legislators directly to vote in support of more state dollars invested in early childhood education and out-of-school time.

Thank the Senator or Representative and staff for taking the time to visit.

5 STEP

Step 6. After the visit.

Send thank you notes to both the policymaker and any staff that attend and reiterate some of the things you discussed. Include any answers to questions asked during the visit. Include any pictures taken from the day. Encourage the parents to send a thank you note too.

6 STEP

Resources

The following resources can help you refine your message and provide facts to assist in developing a one-pager for when policymakers visit your program.

NAEYC

This page has fact sheets with national data about early childhood programs, the workforce and children and families.

<http://www.naeyc.org/policy/advocacy>

The Alliance for Early Success (formerly the Birth to Five Policy Alliance)

This is a larger advocacy toolkit, but that last few pages, (41-55) have one-pagers that contain easy to read facts and talking points all grounded in the research.

http://earlysuccess.org/sites/default/files/website_files/files/July-2011-B25-toolkit-FINAL.pdf

CLASP

This page contains a number of fact sheets on a variety of issues, both early childhood and school age care.

http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/filter?publication_type=fact-sheets

Afterschool Alliance

These pages have fact sheets, issue briefs, reports and state specific data about quality, affordable afterschool programming for children and youth.

<http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/research.cfm>

http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/policyStateFacts.cfm?state_abbr=MN

NACCRA

This page has a link to Child Care Fact Sheets. Each year, NACCRRRA surveys Child Care Resource and Referral agencies for the latest on-the-ground data about child care. Together with Census data and Bureau of Labor Statistics data related to working mothers, NACCRRRA releases a book of state fact sheets.

<http://www.naccrra.org/public-policy/resources>

Zero to Three

This Policy Pocket Card provides you with a quick and easy way to communicate effectively with policymakers about what we know, what we can do, and how we all benefit from supporting early childhood experiences beginning at birth.

<http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/policy-toolkit/5x12-card-trifold-final-12-1-10.pdf>

National Women's Law Center

This page focuses primarily on child care assistance and offers state by state comparisons, as well as state specific fact sheets.

<http://www.nwlc.org/our-issues/child-care-%2526-early-learning/child-care>

Sample Invitation Letter to Send to Your State Legislators for Childcare Centers

[Your Program Letterhead]

[Date]

Representative or Senator Mary Smith
500 XXXXXXXX.
St. Paul, MN 55101

Dear Senator Smith:

The research is clear: Investing in high quality early care and education opportunities results in improved academic achievement, fewer referrals for special education, and increased and improved job opportunities later in life. Nobel Prize winning University of Chicago Economics Professor, James Heckman has determined that investing in early childhood development for high need children and their families provides an annualized 10 percent return on investment through increased personal achievement and social productivity.

With exciting initiatives, like the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grants and Parent Aware, launching in the state, it's clear Minnesotans recognize the long-term impact that quality programs have on the state's prosperity.

We would like to invite you to visit our center in your district. Our program serves 50 birth to 4 year olds; of these 50 percent receive state subsidies. {include a few facts about your program} This is an excellent opportunity to see the quality early learning opportunities that are going on in your community. We would be more than happy to send an alert to the media, providing the date and time that you will be present at the center.

Not only is early education paramount for individual success and financial well-being, it is a critical part of our economic infrastructure. Our state's most precious commodity is our future generations. Minnesota's status as a leader in quality early care and education has been threatened in recent years, but there is still time to rebuild our reputation as a leader by supporting policy changes that will ensure all children are ready for school.

If you would be interested in scheduling a visit to (insert center name), please feel free to contact me at (insert phone) or email me at (insert email address).

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Phone Number]

[E-mail Address]

Sample Invitation Letter to Send to Your State Legislators for Out-of-School Time Programs

[Your Program Letterhead]
[Date]

Representative or Senator Mary Smith
500 XXXXXXXX.
St. Paul, MN 55101

Dear Representative Smith:

I would like to invite you and your staff to visit the [Name of Your Afterschool Program]. Our program provides 300 children with safe, educational activities during the critical hours from 3 to 6 PM, when many parents are still working and juvenile crime rates triple. Students in our program are not only safe; they are doing better in school, and show more interest in learning.

We would like to take you on a short tour of our program on [date] at [time]. If that time is not convenient, we would be happy to work with you to find a time that is. I have also invited members of the local [RotaryClub] and several parents to attend. They are eager to talk with you about the importance of keeping afterschool programs open and making these programs available to more children.

I hope you will join us to see our program, and our students, in action. The benefits of quality out-of-school time and youth development programs are clear. They support working families by ensuring that children are safe and productive when the school day ends. Quality afterschool programs make our communities stronger by involving students, parents, business leaders, and volunteers. Quality afterschool programs give children the opportunity to discover hidden talents as they grow academically and socially.

A profile of the [Name of Your Afterschool Program] is enclosed for your reference. I will contact your office within the next two weeks to follow up. I look forward to seeing you on [date].

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Phone Number]
[E-mail Address]

Sample Thank You Letter to Send to Your State Legislators

[Your Program Letterhead]

[Date]

Representative or Senator Mary Smith
500 XXXXXXXX.
St. Paul, MN 55101

Dear Senator Smith:

Thank you for taking the time to tour our [name of your program]. The children/youth, parents and program staff enjoyed meeting you tremendously, and were delighted to have the chance to share our activities with you. I hope your visit helped to reinforce how much our community values this program. As we discussed, and as I have witnessed first-hand, afterschool/childcare programs keep children/youth safe, inspire learning and help working families.

I look forward to meeting with you again to further discuss the ways in which we can work together to ensure that afterschool programs stay open and are available to more children in our community and our state.

Thank you again for taking the time to visit!

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Phone Number]

[E-mail Address]