

THE Center for Education Reform



**BUILDING  
COMMUNITY  
SUPPORT FOR  
EDUCATION  
REFORM**

*Planting Grassroots*



## GRASSROOTS IN ACTION

**The Center for Education Reform**

**800-521-2118**

**[www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com)**

*The Center for Education Reform drives the creation of better educational opportunities for all children by leading parents, policymakers and the media in boldly advocating for school choice, advancing the charter school movement, and challenging the education establishment.*

*The Center for Education Reform changes laws, minds and cultures to allow good schools to flourish.*



The Center for Education Reform

# BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION REFORM

## *Planting Grassroots*

**A** S A PARENT, YOU HAVE THE RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO STAND UP AND DEMAND THE BEST EDUCATION FOR YOUR CHILD.

It is important that you learn all that you can about how schools work and then turn that knowledge into action for your children.

Whether you are just trying to make changes to improve your own child's situation or you have decided to challenge and change the system for the better of all children you have taken the first step!

This "Grassroots in Action" booklet will supply you with information to help you become active in your community and guide you toward making a difference.

One person CAN make a difference!

## Tips To Get You Started

### 1. Get Informed!

The first step to school reform is to get informed. Information is power. Be sure to ask the right questions and demand the right answers. Put this knowledge to work for you and your community. Whether you're planning to crusade for change, or simply taking on the important work of helping your child through school, you must be an informed parent about education.

### 2. Strength In Numbers!

Americans are united in their commitment to education. Find out which like-minded groups or individuals are active in your community. Recruit your friends and family to help you stand up for better schools. Turn one letter into ten, one phone call into twenty. Create an influential organization.

### 3. Get The Word Out!

Communication is the key to school reform. Now it is time to go out into your community. You need to let people know how important your schools are, and let lawmakers know that you expect them to follow through on important decisions regarding education.



# 1. Get Informed

Information is power. Education insiders have valuable information, statistics and figures on your local and state schools. Take advantage of these resources.

- ✧ Set up a meeting with your child’s teacher.
- ✧ Approach your school principal.
- ✧ Attend a local school board meeting.
- ✧ Write a letter to your district’s superintendent requesting information on your community’s schools.
- ✧ Get a copy of your school’s budget at the school board or local library – the school board usually sets the budget; the superintendent administers it.
- ✧ Call your state education agency.
- ✧ Call your state or local union’s public relations contact to get on a mailing list.

## Organizations to Help You Get Started:

- ☉ Parent Guides and Resources: [www.pickyparent.com](http://www.pickyparent.com)
- ☉ State Policy Network: [www.spn.org](http://www.spn.org) *Find a research group in your state.*
- ☉ The Center for Education Reform: [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com)
- ☉ School Information: [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com) *Learn about your school.*

**Become an Educated Consumer — remember —your tax dollars are paying for the public schools in your community!**

Do your homework and ask the right questions. Listed below are some sample questions to guide you.

## RESEARCH

### A. Quality

- ✧ What does the state say about your local school? How does it compare to other schools?
- ✧ Does the school test? If so, how does it use the results and how did your child fare? If it is not up to par, what is the plan to improve it?
- ✧ What is the school's graduation rate, dropout rate, and college enrollment rate?
- ✧ Does your school have advanced placement courses?
- ✧ Does your school have remedial courses?
- ✧ Does it offer curriculum graduation requirements?
- ✧ How are teachers hired, evaluated, and rewarded for a job well done?
- ✧ Is your school small enough that the teachers can get to know your child?

### B. Spending: *How is your tax dollar being spent?*

- ✧ What are the district and state funding formulas?
- ✧ How big is the central administration in comparison to the number of schools and teachers?
- ✧ What is the per-pupil spending? What is the average teacher salary?
- ✧ How much is spent on various programs?
- ✧ How much is spent on Special Education?

### C. Who is in control?

- ✧ District Board Members: Are they elected or appointed?  
Which groups endorse each individual member?
- ✧ How are the district's superintendents chosen and what is their philosophy?
- ✧ State Board of Education: How much power do they have?  
How do they relate to the Governor and the state superintendent?
- ✧ Is the state superintendent elected or appointed?
- ✧ Who heads the State Department of Education?  
What regular information does the Department provide to the public?

#### ***TIP: Don't Take Their Word for It!***

*Be prepared to receive misleading information along the way. As one expert explains,*

*“The people who produce our information about educational performance are by and large the same people who are running the system whose performance is being assessed.”*

*To make certain you are getting the complete picture:*

- ① *Check with several sources*
- ① *Collect all the information you can on your school's test results*

## 2. **Strength In Numbers: How to create an organization to influence policy.**

Can one person really make a difference? Yes, and you are that person! Whether you are working for change as an individual or as a group, you need to recruit your friends and others in your community because, the more people you recruit . . .the more people will listen!

### **A. Build your support list**

Find out who else in your community is involved in education reform so you can build on their work.

Sample groups include:

- ✧ Veterans' groups
- ✧ Your local Chamber of Commerce
- ✧ Professional Societies
- ✧ Charter Schools
- ✧ Civic associations
- ✧ Church groups
- ✧ Community Education Groups

You will need to decide whether you want to try to work through existing organizations you have identified, or whether your reform goals would be better served by establishing an independent organization under your control and direction.



## **B. Organize your allies:**

- ✧ Talk with friends and acquaintances who might have similar concerns about education issues.
- ✧ Assemble a list of names, addresses and phone numbers of local activists and potential donors who might be friendly to your cause.
- ✧ Hold a preliminary meeting to define your goals, mission and frequency of meetings.
- ✧ Pick your leadership team.
- ✧ Figure out the finances. Take up a collection for basic start-up costs, and ask everyone to contribute. Contributions can also be “in-kind,” which means that someone offers their car, phone, or time without cost to the organization. You do not need a lot of money to start.

## **C. Put A Plan In Place:**

- ✧ Develop a basic business plan and sales pitch.
- ✧ Explain who your affiliates are and what interests those people represent.
- ✧ Define your short and long term goals.
- ✧ Forecast where you would like to be in about six months.

### ***TIP: Keep your goals modest.***

*For example, do not say you will have legislation passed during your first six months, but do say that you plan to reach out to all civic groups, school leaders and other pertinent members of your community.*

## **D. Expand your coalition:**

- ✧ Host public and community forums to introduce group leaders to other community groups. Invite national and state speakers to lend credibility and a broader perspective to the discussion.
- ✧ Make contact with national reform groups. Let them know you are out there working locally for reform. Ask for their help and support.
- ✧ Endorsements are valuable because they give credibility to your group, indicate your broad appeal and establish you as an organization of consequence in the community.

## **Possible Endorsement Candidates:**

- ⊙ Business Leaders
- ⊙ Civic and Church group leaders who are not readily identified with a particular cause or ideology
- ⊙ Parents of public school students
- ⊙ Public school teachers, principals, and officials
- ⊙ Concerned taxpayers
- ⊙ Elected officials



### 3. **Get The Word Out: Communication is the key to school reform.**

Many Americans still do not know much about education reform – your friends, family, and colleagues may even be part of that group. Now it is time to go out into your community.

#### **A. Developing your message:**

- ✧ Define who or what your group is.
- ✧ Establish why your efforts are needed.
- ✧ Provide a solution by stating clearly what it is the community can do to help.

Put together a brief paper or fact sheet on your organization and your issue. Provide clear contact information that establishes your group as a reliable, objective source of information. Have your mission and goals stated and make sure you are specific in your details.

#### **B. One of the most effective means of communicating is by mail:**

Develop a mailing list and create a newsletter. Your newsletter must look professional and you should be consistent in the mailings whether it is monthly, quarterly or bi-monthly.

Mailing List possibilities:

- ☉ Your supporters (moral as well as financial)
- ☉ Select education leaders
- ☉ Parents
- ☉ Officers of community groups and churches
- ☉ Business leaders
- ☉ Professional associations
- ☉ Friendly Media

***TIP: Don't forget email is free!***

*You can make an impact in an affordable way. Send e-newsletters. This allows you to update regularly and is cost effective. Be careful not to overload.*

*When meeting individuals in person, bring your fact sheet or newsletter with you. Leave clear contact information with them.*

**C. Plan an Event**

An excellent way to get the word out is to hold a public meeting. Plan early and invite respected individuals in your community. Invite local or national leaders to speak. Don't forget to include the press. Be sure to get the names and addresses of those in attendance so you can follow-up afterwards with a mailing. Food is always a plus!



## Help the Media Work With You

Reporters come in all shapes and sizes and so do media outlets. You must have a complete list of people who may be likely to cover education reform and your efforts. The key to winning over the media is in establishing good relationships in which they can rely on you for information and assistance in reporting education news.

### A. CREATE A LIST

It is important that you keep a list of the reporters who cover education, community and political stories. Reporters switch jobs frequently, so it is important to keep your list up-to-date.

Find the right Contact-

- ✧ **Newspapers:** Education reporter, city or metro reporter, assignment editor, general editor and publisher. Don't forget the free, weekly neighborhood newspaper.
- ✧ **Magazines:** Feature Editor, editor-in-chief and publisher.
- ✧ **T.V.:** News desk, assignment editor, education reporter, special events producer and anchor. Start off with the local network affiliates rather than national bureaus.
- ✧ **Radio:** Executive producer, producer for a particular show and program host. Include both local and syndicated programs.
- ✧ **Wire Services:** Contact the regional or state bureau, often located in the state capital. Include the Associated Press, United Press International and Reuters and Scripps Howard.
- ✧ **News Organizations and Larger Television Outlets:** Producers of news and feature shows at cable stations, both local and national, regularly sift through information they get to find good stories. Include CNN and other regional or local cable programs on your list, and include them in any releases you might do.

The best way to ensure that you have the right reporters on your list is to read the newspapers and magazines in your community and watch the T.V. news. Take note of which reporters are covering education, community events, and politics. Be sure they are on your list.

## **B. FIND THE RIGHT SPOKESPERSON**

Find one person who can speak on behalf of your organization. This person should be a respected member of your community, possess the ability to speak clearly about your mission and goals, and be able to answer tough questions.

Additionally, give reporters a readily available contact person from your organization. They should be available by cell phone, home phone, or email.

## **C. FACT SHEETS**

Fact sheets should clearly state your mission and goals.

When making contact with someone, including the press, always have a fact sheet ready to give to him or her. Give the specifics up front. Reporters are always busy and it is your job to make finding the information easy.

## **D. INTRODUCE YOURSELF**

Begin to build your media relationships by getting to know who's who in the press. Set up a meeting with the education reporter or editor of your local paper. In your first meeting, introduce your organization's goals, members of your team, and some specific short-term projects. Always follow up the meeting with a thank-you note.

## E. UNDERSTAND YOUR MEDIA TOOLS

When reaching out to the media, put together your information and make your pitch unique and informative. Always stick to the facts. Seek out stories in your area that YOU can bring to their attention.

**Advisories** are one-page information sheets that tell the press who, what, where and when. Send these to the press instead of an invitation 2-6 weeks before an event, and then again one week before.

**Press Releases** are a more detailed communication with the media. They should be clear and to the point, highlighting new and noteworthy information about an event, research you have conducted, or even a publication your organization has produced. Remember to include quotes from you or your community on the subject.

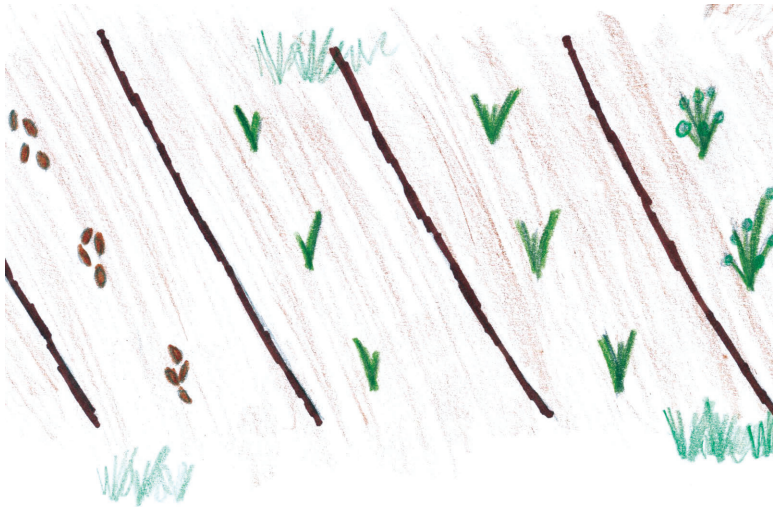
A **Daybook** is a book of events kept by some news outlets. Check and make sure to get your event in a media outlet's daybook.

Don't forget the **Editorial Page!** Editorial Board Meetings are informal discussions that you can set up with editorial page editors. Make sure you are flexible and offer to come by at their convenience. You might want to bring along a high profile supporter to entice them to meet with you. Also, letters to the editor are a great opportunity for your group to clarify or voice your opinion about any press coverage about your group or an issue. Make these letters short and to the point (no more than 250 words). If they are too long they most likely will not get picked up by the paper. Opinion Editorials are another way to get your voice heard and they provide a larger forum for you to discuss your views. Try getting a respected member of your community to "author" it. An Op-Ed should be no longer than 750 words. It should clearly state your opinion and be supported by facts and quotes from local leaders.

Another great way to get your message out is the **Radio**. Most talk radio stations have a lot of airtime to fill and are always looking for interesting guests and stories. Select someone from your group who can speak successfully on your organization's behalf. Always put your best foot forward!

**TIP:** *If you want the media to work with you, you need to understand how they operate. The most important thing to remember is that the press is always working on a deadline. Therefore, you should never contact them after 2:00 pm unless they have called you for information. When talking to the press, always find out their deadline so you can get them the information they need in time. Also, don't make promises you cannot keep. Never tell the press you can help them when you may not have the time or resources to do so. But always tell the press you will get back to them and then do, so that they will call you the next time around.*

*You may not always be successful in your media contact attempts. You may have to try a dozen times, but with persistence you will get your views into the media and out to the public!*





## How To Make Sure Elected Officials Follow Through on Education

Education is a political issue. Don't be afraid of the word "political"! Political is a fancy word for building relationships. Legislators are people just like you. You have to communicate with them to build a relationship. Your best hope is to find legislators who will champion your cause with their colleagues.

### A. Ask the Right Questions

- ✧ What educational goals do they hope to accomplish during their term in office?
- ✧ What are their existing goals?
- ✧ How will they accomplish them?
- ✧ Do they think money is the answer or are they willing to back real change like teacher rewards, accountability and school choice?
- ✧ What role should parents play in the education process?
- ✧ What should we expect?

## B. Meet Face to Face

- ✧ Call in advance for an appointment. Explain the purpose of your visit.
- ✧ Be on time and flexible. Legislators have busy schedules, so be prepared for delays and interruptions.
- ✧ Deliver a focused message in five or ten minutes.
- ✧ Be prepared to answer questions.
- ✧ Remember never go empty handed. Bring materials and your contact information.
- ✧ Offer your group's help on the issue.
- ✧ Remember not to leave empty-handed. Ask for a letter from the legislator on his or her position.
- ✧ Follow up the meeting with a thank you letter and a request for any additional information you may need.

## C. Write Letters

Provide members of your group with a sample draft letter, but ask that they personalize the letters they send.

*To assist you in your efforts, visit [The Center for Education Reform's website](#). In our **Grassroots Action Center** you can find your legislators, compose a message, use our draft letters as a guide, print out your letter, or send it via email.*

[www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com)

Win over the public and media one step at a time. Attract them to you and show them that you are a credible organization. Prove that you are working for the betterment of your community and start painting a picture of what things would be like with your particular brand of school reform.

Work to establish your organization as an overall education advocacy group within the community. Not all of your ideas will be understood or liked by everyone. Be broad, keep your goal in sight, and pursue it carefully and determinedly.

When dealing with lawmakers you may not be able to change a legislator's mind, but respectful, informative, and persuasive communication can go a long way toward softening his position. Effectively articulating your viewpoint to lawmakers, whether they agree or not, is sure to work to your benefit.



## **You CAN be a school reformer!**

*If you are interested in learning How To Start A Charter School  
visit our website:*

**[www.edreform.com/toolkit/startaschool.pdf](http://www.edreform.com/toolkit/startaschool.pdf)**

*or contact*

**The Center for Education Reform**

*at*

1-800-521-2118

***Whatever your goal, whatever your inclination,  
you can be an effective reformer with a lot of information,  
a lot of energy and some good direction!***

## Notes



**Notes**



## Notes



## Notes





**TOOLKIT**

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