



Student Advocacy Guide

How You Can Influence Government Decisions

Table of Contents

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?	2
WHAT IS YOUR ISSUE?	2
STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	2
MASSACHUSETTS GOVERNMENT	2
NEEDHAM GOVERNMENT.....	4
BOSTON GOVERNMENT	5
DEVELOPING AN ADVOCACY STRATEGY	5
ADVOCATING AT THE STATE LEVEL	5
LOBBYING LEGISLATORS	5
GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY.....	8
MEDIA ADVOCACY	9
ADVOCATING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL	11
NEEDHAM	11
BOSTON.....	11
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	11

Appendix

Sample Letters to the Editor / Op-Eds

This Guide, the Appendix, topic area videos, and other information from LWV-Needham is available at <https://lwv-needham.org/nhs-civics-projects/>.

March 2022

What Is Advocacy?

Advocacy is the act of speaking on behalf of or in support of another person, place, or thing. This Guide deals with advocacy for an issue that you care about.

Lobbying is the act of talking to elected officials about the merits of your position on an issue. Your goal is to influence their position through your knowledge of and passion for the issue. Paid lobbyists and special interest groups aggressively seek to influence public policy, but the same message has a different impact coming from a student—and future voter—in the district. Students have a unique opportunity to educate our elected officials about the views of new or future voters.

Grassroots advocacy refers to common or ordinary people joining together for a specific cause. Grassroots advocacy includes organizing, mobilizing, and engaging the public to advance the cause. Students may start a grassroots movement or join grassroots organizations already in existence.

Media advocacy is a means to get your message out to the public, beyond government officials and those already engaged in the issue. Individuals, grassroots organizations, candidates, officials, etc., all use media to reach the public at large, hoping to gain broad support for their cause. You should explore different types of media that reach fellow students but also go beyond your own peer groups.

What Is Your Issue?

Your issue can be anything that is controlled by the government that you think should be changed. Before deciding on an issue, consider some practical questions, such as: How can a change be made (e.g., enacting a constitutional amendment, passing a law, changing a policy)? Are others working on this issue (e.g., advocacy groups and individuals)?

State and Local Government

Massachusetts Government



Massachusetts State House, Boston

The Massachusetts legislature, or General Court, is the primary author of laws enacted in Massachusetts. It is a two-chambered body; the Senate has 40 members and the House of Representatives has 160 members, all of whom are elected to concurrent two-year terms in November of even-numbered years.

The official website of the Massachusetts General Court is malegislature.gov. Here you will find listings of legislators, bills and laws, and hearings and events. Many of the hearings and events are livestreamed and recorded.

Each two-year legislative session begins on the first Wednesday in January of an odd-numbered

year and ends on the day before the beginning of the next session. Most of the active work on legislation, however, is completed by the last day of the formal session, July 31 of an even-numbered year.

Most legislation is submitted to the House or Senate Clerk's office on or before 5:00 p.m. on the third Friday in January. Any citizen may submit a proposal for a law to a legislator and request the legislator's support in submitting it as a bill. In the weeks prior to filing, caucuses are held in which sponsors seek other legislators to cosponsor their bills.

Bills are given House or Senate numbers, assigned to a joint committee, and sent to the non-initiating chamber for agreement and committee assignment. Once a bill is submitted to a joint committee, that committee must hold a public hearing on the bill; interested parties may attend and submit oral and/or written testimony. Most bills must be reported out of joint committees by a deadline, set by the legislature, early in the second year of the session to remain active in that session.

Following the public hearing, the committee will deliberate in Executive Session and make its recommendation to the body that initiated the bill. Their options are: 1) ought to pass; 2) ought not to pass; 3) ought to pass as changed; 4) discharge to another committee; 5) refer for a study order. (A study order authorizes the committee to create a subcommittee to study the bill during recess and file a report on its findings, but this is often a quiet way to kill a bill.) Frequently, the bill number will change during this process and subsequent deliberations.

Once a bill is out of the joint committee, a series of reviews by House and/or Senate committees occurs. Bills can be held up or die in these committees, particularly the Ways and Means Committee. With a positive vote ("passed to be engrossed"), the bill is sent to the non-initiating body. The non-initiating chamber places the bill on its calendar to be discussed and voted on. Both chambers must deliver a positive vote on the same bill. If the second chamber alters the initiating chamber's bill, a conference committee is formed to work out a bill that both branches will adopt.

Once both branches have "passed to be engrossed" the identical bill, it is sent to the Engrossing Division for the official printing. The bill is then sent first to the House and then the Senate for enactment. The engrossed bill may be debated and rejected (but not amended) in either chamber, but this is usually just a formality.

The final step is for the governor to either sign or veto the bill. A two-thirds vote of both houses of the legislature is required to override a gubernatorial veto. You can find out what [bills are on the governor's desk](#).

Needham Government



Needham Town Hall

Needham is primarily governed by state law, town charter, and general by-laws. Needham has a Representative Town Meeting with the Select Board and Town Manager serving as the overseeing entities.

Town Meeting

The legislative body of Needham's town government is the Representative Town Meeting. There are a total of 240 elected Town Meeting Members (24 from each of 10 precincts), plus up to 14 members at large.

The Annual Town Meeting begins on the first Monday in May and continues Monday and Wednesday until all business is completed. Special Town Meetings may be called by the Select Board as needed—this often occurs in the fall.

The elected Town Moderator presides at Town Meeting, and the public may attend and speak on issues being considered upon recognition by the Moderator. The Needham Channel broadcasts Town Meeting live on the local government channel and posts it for future viewing.

Town Meeting is responsible for passing the annual town budget, approving funding for capital items and stabilization funds, amending the town's general and zoning by-laws, adopting resolutions, and addressing other matters deemed appropriate.

The agenda and supplementary information for Town Meetings are contained in the Town Meeting Warrant. The Warrant consists of Articles for each item to be voted on and also includes supplementary information. Warrants are delivered to Town Meeting Members in advance of Town Meeting (7 days for Annual TM and 14 days for Special TM). Warrants and supporting documents are posted on the town website at <http://needhamma.gov/townmeeting>.

Select Board

The executive body of Needham's town government is the Select Board. This board consists of five members elected for three years, with overlapping terms. The Select Board, as the executive body, has general supervision over all matters that are not specifically delegated by law or vote to some other officer or board.

Town Manager

The Town Manager is appointed by the Select Board and serves as the chief executive officer of the town. The Town Manager is responsible for day-to-day administration, appointing and supervising most town employees, and implementing policies set by the Select Board and Town Meeting. The primary duties and responsibilities of the Town Manager are spelled out in the Town Charter Part 3, Section 20.

Town of Needham Information

Town website: www.needhamma.gov

[General By-Laws and Town Charter](#)

[Zoning By-Laws](#)

[Annual Town Reports](#)

[List and links to all Needham boards and committees, elected and appointed](#)

Boston Government



Boston City Hall

Students who live in Boston may be interested in advocating for a neighborhood or citywide issue. The city of Boston has a Mayor and City Council system. In this form of municipal government, the City Council serves as the city's primary legislative body and the Mayor serves as the city's chief executive.

City of Boston Information

[City of Boston Government](#)

[City of Boston Departments](#)

Developing an Advocacy Strategy

An advocacy strategy describes how you will persuade the policymakers to support your issue, ideas, or a specific course of action. The strategy should focus on identifying your key messages and how you will deliver them to your elected officials through lobbying, grassroots campaigns, and media strategies.

Advocating at the State Level

Lobbying Legislators

Lobbying involves direct contact with legislators, usually from your own district. Each resident has two state legislators—a Senator and a Representative. Attending in-person meetings at the State House, in-person meetings in the district, or remote meetings, and mailing letters, sending email, or telephoning can all be effective ways of lobbying. Legislators' staff count all communications, particularly those from constituents. However, legislators and their staff tell us that that some forms of communication are more effective than others.

Contact information for legislators may be found at malegislature.gov where there is also a tool to find your two state legislators by entering your zip code. Most legislators also have their own website and social media sites.

Common sense and practical considerations are the best guides for how best to communicate with your legislators. Each legislator's staff may also be able to give you some guidance. If you have a lot of information to share, a written communication may be most effective. If time is of the essence, a phone call or email may be best. When calling your legislator's office, it is likely

that you will speak to a staff member.

A first contact with a legislator or staff member can be the beginning of an ongoing, productive relationship. A thank-you note when your legislator takes the action you requested or just takes the time to meet or discuss an issue with you helps build a relationship. Even if you disagree with your legislator on one issue, you may be able to work together on another.

Before Contacting Your Legislators

KNOW YOUR “ASK”: Be specific about what you are asking your legislators to do. Would you like them to sponsor, cosponsor, contact committee chairs, report bill out of committee favorably, bring the bill to the floor for a vote, vote yes, etc.

- Do your research before attending a meeting, sending an email, or making a phone call.
 - Know who the lead sponsor of the bill is, if the elected official is a cosponsor or supporter, and who or what organizations endorse the proposal.
 - Determine the current status of the bill by checking malegislature.gov.
- Share your personal story/experience in the topic area.
 - Why is this important to you?
 - How would this impact you and your community?
- Be kind.
 - Thank legislators and staff for their support on other bills and for their time.
 - Staff are your friends! Ask for their contact information and follow up after the meeting.
 - Always send a thank-you.

Lobbying by Phone, Email, or Letter

A telephone call or an email to your legislator is a quick and simple way to lobby for a bill or issue. Telephone and email contacts can be found at malegislature.gov. All you need to say is who you are, where you live, and why you are calling. It is useful to include the bill number.

Sample Phone Conversation

Receptionist: Good morning. Senator Joan Smith’s office.

You: Hi. My name is Jane Q. Public, and I live at 100 Main Street in Hometown.

Receptionist: May I help you?

You: I am calling to urge Senator Smith to vote for Senate Bill [number], which [does what?] [example: requires lunch be provided free for all elementary school students].

Receptionist: I will let the senator know.

You: Thank you. Good-bye.

Receptionist: Good-bye.

Sample Short Email

Dear Senator Smith,

I am writing to urge you to vote for Senate Bill [number], which [does what?] [example: requires lunch be provided free for all elementary school students].

[Write briefly about your personal reason for supporting the issue, if you have one.]

Thank you,

Jane Q. Public

100 Main Street, Hometown

Writing a Letter or More Detailed Email (legislators will be impressed!)

When you write to elected officials, remember to:

- Address only one issue per document.
- Include a succinct and relevant subject line.
- Add your contact information (street address, email address, and phone number).
- Refer to and describe the bill.
- Be clear about what you are asking for.
- State the reasons for your position.
- Humanize the issue.
- Thank the legislator for his or her attention to the matter.
- Use official titles in both letters and emails:
 - A letter should be addressed formally (e.g., The Honorable John Smith, title, and official address).
- Emails should start: Dear Senator, Representative, Governor, Mayor, Councilwoman, etc.
- Include or attach fact sheets or other support documentation, but don't overwhelm them.

Form letters are online forms or suggested email text written and distributed by an advocacy group to many people. These may be the least effective form of communication, but they do save time and express your views. Most form letters offer the opportunity to alter the message to make it more personal, so take the time to do that when you can.

Lobbying by Meeting with Legislator(s) (in-person or remotely)

Arranging a Meeting

If your legislator has scheduled "office hours" in town, follow directions or arrange to meet there. For other in-person or remote meetings in the district or at the State House, call the legislator's office to request a meeting. State your name, address, and the purpose of the meeting. Staff often ask the bill's number so the legislator can be prepared, so be sure to have the [current number](#).

During the Meeting

- Thank the legislator(s) and staff for meeting with you and for attending your presentation.
- Be relatively brief, no more than 30 minutes.
- Share personal experiences that shed light on this issue: Why does your issue matter to you?
- State key reasons for your views.
- Refer to specific bill numbers.
- Provide a fact sheet and other support documentation (in moderation) to leave with the legislator. Include your name, business card, or other identifying material so they will remember you and your issue. Be aware that your legislator may not be familiar with your bill.
- Is the legislator a cosponsor? Does the legislator support the bill(s)?
- If YES, thank the legislator for his or her support and ask for the next step in the legislative process.
- If NO or not yet, ask the legislator for his or her support.
- Counter any arguments the opposition may use.
- If you are comfortable doing so, take a photo of you and your fellow lobbyists with your legislator. Post it on social media, and tag the legislator.
- Thank the legislator for taking the time to meet with you.

After the Meeting

- Send a thank-you via email or follow-up communication.
- Tweet a thank-you to your legislator.

Grassroots Advocacy

Grassroots advocacy refers to common or ordinary people joining together for a specific cause. Grassroots advocacy includes organizing, mobilizing, and engaging the public to advance the cause. Students may start a grassroots movement or participate through grassroots organizations already in existence.

A grassroots organization develops a strategic advocacy plan that includes multiple actions, high visibility, and mobilizing large numbers of people.

A strategic plan of action and advocacy may include:

- Employing lobbying techniques outlined in the section above
- Attending committee hearings (wearing visible stickers or t-shirts)
- Organizing or attending lobby days together
- Creating sample letters to the editor or op-eds for local newspapers
- Planning rallies, marches, or other high-visibility events
- Maintaining a social media and web presence for members and the public
- Holding public forums to educate and/or advocate
- Joining with other grassroots organizations to advocate for specific common goals

To organize a new group, you can:

- Organize a group of students or residents to strategize about advocating for an issue
- Ask friends, neighbors, and colleagues to join your organization
- Use media opportunities to build a larger group
- Send a press release about the formation of the group to the local newspapers and local cable news stations
- Develop a logo, tagline, and mission
- Prepare your strategy for action and advocacy

Media Advocacy

Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor

Opinion pieces (or op-eds) and letters to the editor are mechanisms to get your opinions printed. Generally, op-eds are longer than letters, and often (although not always) letters respond to a published article or editorial. **Check the target publication to determine the rules and word limits prior to preparing your submission.**

Op-Eds

Op-ed is an abbreviation for “opposite the editorial page” because in printed newspapers they often appeared on a page facing the editorial page. Op-eds express the opinion of the author on a particular issue and offer an excellent opportunity for you to advance your message. Even if your op-ed is not published, it can be posted on your own website or google drive and shared on social media.

The following are some tips for writing and submitting an op-ed that will increase your chances of getting it published:

- Determine your goal. What do you want to achieve through your op-ed? Do you want people to take a specific action?
- When drafting your op-ed, make sure that you are familiar with the types of pieces that are generally published in the paper, and be sure to focus on the topic’s significance to the community.
- Look up the rules for submitting a piece to the paper (word counts, methods of submission, and other factors vary depending on the newspaper).
- Select one message to communicate.
- Be controversial or thought provoking.
- Illustrate how the topic or issue affects readers. Put a face on the issue by starting your essay with the story of someone who has been affected, or begin with an attention-getting statistic.
- Describe the problem and why it exists. This is often where you can address the opposing viewpoint and explain your perspective.
- Offer your solution to the problem, and explain why it’s the best option.
- Conclude on a strong note by repeating your message or stating a call to action.
- Add one or two sentences at the end that include your name and title and describe your credentials as they relate to the topic (if any).

Letters to the Editor

You can use letters to the editor to correct or interpret facts in response to an inaccurate or biased article, to explain the connection between a news item and your priority issues, or to praise or criticize a recent article or editorial. Whatever your purpose, your letter will reach many people in your community—without exception, the letters section is one of the most highly read segments of newspapers and magazines.

In the first paragraph of your letter, refer to the article or position that you are writing about. If it is in reference to a particular article, name the reporter who wrote the article, the date, and the title of the article. State why you disagree, and then give your position on that issue.

Letters to the editor should be short and pithy. Most letters should be less than 200 words. The first sentence is often the most important. Letters should be concise, informative, and personal at the same time.

For larger papers, such as *The Boston Globe* or *Boston Herald*, letters to the editor generally respond to published articles, editorials, or op-eds. The key to getting your letter published is making sure that it is timely. Ideally, you would submit a letter to the editor within 24 hours after the piece you're responding to appeared.

For smaller papers, such as the *MetroWest Daily News* or *Needham Times*, letters can be about any topic and do not have to be related to something previously published. Use the same guidance listed under op-eds, but your letter must be shorter.

For examples of published Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor, [see the Appendix](#).

Social Media and Websites

Social media reaches a different audience than the traditional media options discussed above. Social media allows you to be creative with graphics, short videos, and political cartoons. A social media post may link to a fact sheet, a call to action, or an editorial for those wanting more details.

Twitter is the social media platform used by Massachusetts legislators. It is a great advocacy tool and offers a way to stay updated on Massachusetts political trends.

Remember to:

- Frame the “ask” positively - e.g., contact your legislators to support your issue.
- Use the hashtag #mapoli.
- Tag bill sponsors as well as other organization in your coalition if you are working within one.

A website advocating for a bill or an issue is a good place to present longer material, such as fact sheets, links to further information, op-eds, information about supporting organizations, etc. Social media posts can lead people to your website.

Advocating at the Local Level

Needham

The methods listed above for state level advocacy are similar at the local level, but it may be less obvious who to contact for your issue. In Needham, Town Meeting makes final decisions, but other boards and individuals have the authority to make policy decisions and to determine what issues come before Town Meeting.

It is usually obvious which board or committee to approach, depending on your issue. If your issue deals with the schools, then the School Committee is a good place to start; for fields, the Park and Recreation Commission; for zoning, the Planning Board. The Select Board has authority over several departments, including Public Works, Police, Fire, and Buildings, and carries out several other [specific roles](#).

Visit the [Town of Needham YouTube channel](#) for recordings of Needham's board meetings.

For a list and links to all Needham boards and committees, elected and appointed, see the [Town of Needham website](#).

In addition, a group of Needham voters can propose a "citizens' petition" to Town Meeting. These may be to change a by-law, to resolve to take an action, or simply to state the will of Town Meeting. Recently passed citizens' petitions included declaring a climate emergency. A recently failed citizens' petition was to change the zoning by-law for a specific area of town. [See the rules governing citizens' petitions and how to collect signatures](#). Citizens' petitions should be carefully considered and discussed with town officials in advance to have the greatest chance of success.

Boston

In Boston, the [Mayor](#) and [City Council](#) are the elected officials. Appointed [boards and commissions](#) are an important part of Boston's government. Each board or commission works with internal departments, City Councilors, and the public to serve the city. The boards and commissions website gives information and contacts for each board and commission.

Acknowledgments

This Guide was prepared by the League of Women Voters of Needham. It was inspired by, and in some cases adapted from, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts Citizen Lobbyist Handbook.