

Action Guide

AMSD Lobbying Guide for Parents

How citizens can support students, schools and public education at the Minnesota State Legislature

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AMSD SERVICES



Getting Started



The future of our children and their education matters. Our elected officials have the responsibility of assuring that a good public education system works, and provides what our children need. So, where do we start to share ideas, issues, concerns and facts with our elected officials?

This booklet will help you get started.

Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever does." The first step is to find a group of concerned citizens. Start with your parent leadership. The elected leaders at each school are a good place to look. If this year's leaders are too busy, look at last year's leaders. They will have learned a lot about the district and the schools, and may be ready to move into new work.

Talk with school staff and the school board. It will be important to work closely with the superintendent and the board members as you move forward. Let them know you are interested in learning about how to work with elected officials to help the school district

Set a meeting time to share information about how to gain and maintain the funding needed to appropriately support the schools, and how to work with elected officials on school issues. Invite someone from each school. Make the meeting known to all members of the parent groups. If you have had a recent referendum, ask those leaders to come. Ask for RSVP's and encourage participation.

Set an agenda that reflects concerns that have been articulated by parents in your district: Why the budget falls short each year, why the class sizes cannot be reduced, why parents need to supply so many supplies, why the testing seems so frequent, or other topics of interest. Hand out this booklet and review it.

Ask legislators to attend and promote that they are coming. Ask AMSD staff to attend and speak. Ask members of legislative groups from other districts to come.

Plan a visit to the State Capitol and ask your legislators to host. Do this before the legislative session starts in January, or early in the session when legislators have more time.

Designate a leader, work on a platform, start your e-mail list with people who indicate interest, and you are on your way! It will take time but participation will grow. To maintain a consistent and unified message align your platform with the AMSD platform.

Keep it simple for volunteers. Provide sample e-mails, practice talking to legislators and leaving messages. Plans trip to legislative offices. Take in committee hearings. The more people do, the more comfortable it becomes.

Know that you have support and use it.
This is the job of a citizen. You can do it. And it matters.



Making a Difference

Contact with legislators puts a human face on K-12 policies and the funding formula. You have the information legislators need. Real information is what counts. They want to hear your story. You are the expert on K-12 education. And you vote.

Getting Started

Credibility
Clout

How to Begin

Voters have the most credibility and clout with their local legislators, the people who represent them. A good working relationship will help. Introduce yourself to your senator or representative in person, or start with a telephone call or an e-mail message.

Get Informed and Stay Informed

Local School Facts
District Facts
Legislative Impact

Tell Your Story

You know a lot about your local school. You know about your student's experience in learning. To be effective with legislators, it is also helpful to know something about your district's budget and how legislative decisions affect it. Local school officials can help you learn the local facts.

Take Action

Contact Legislators
Talk to Neighbors and Friends
Be Persistent

Communicate With Legislators

Communicate by telephone, letter, e-mail or in person. Let your legislators know public education should be the Legislature's top priority. Share a story about your child's school. Communicate clearly about the painful reality of budget cuts, but don't forget to talk about the success stories too.

Discuss your concerns with friends and neighbors.
Encourage others to get involved. Every voice counts.

Continue to send messages about how you value public education, what your student needs, and what the schools need. Thank legislators for their responses. Stay in touch with them. Don't stop until the legislation session is over. Then start again.



Get and Stay Informed

The Legislature's web pages offer a full range of information and happenings at the Capitol. AMSD also has information on its web site specific to actions affecting metropolitan school districts. There are also telephone, print and e-mail resources for both House and Senate.

www.leg.state.mn.us

The Minnesota Legislature's web site:

- Legislators' contact information
- What is happening in the K-12 committees each week
- Sign up to get House and Senate schedules by e-mail
- Locate bills and bill summaries, and track the progress of specific bills
- Daily summaries of House action, and weekly House and Senate recaps
- Answers to more than 100 frequently asked questions
- Identification of bills your legislator has introduced
- Directions to the Capitol

www.amsd.org

AMSD places information on its web site about the progress of its legislative agenda, and other actions affecting schools, throughout the legislation session.

- AMSD's platform and background information on key issues
- Position papers on key issues not included in AMSD's platform
- Information on the financial status of metro-area school districts
- Analysis of how bills under consideration would affect individual districts
- Links to important news items about K-12 schools

House Public
Information

House information resources can be accessed by calling 651-296-2146, 1-888-657-1112, or 651-296-9896 TTY

Senate Public
Information

Senate information resources can be accessed by calling 651-296-0504, 1-888-234-1112, or 651-296-0250 TTY

Questions

Call AMSD at 651-999-7325



Tips on Timing & Tenacity

The new legislative session begins on January 6, 2009. It will be vitally important for public schools. This is the first year of a two-year legislative cycle, meaning that it is a budget year. By the time they adjourn in May, legislators will have made the major K-12 funding decisions for the next two school years, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011.

Groundwork

Early in the session is the time to lay groundwork. Late in the session activities will suddenly speed up and it will be time to take action. Write, e-mail and call legislators before the session starts, and repeat the contacts as the session begins. And keep it up. Share stories, provide facts, show needs and define issues. Thank legislators for past support and show successes.

Process & Timing

Legislative sessions seem slow to progress at the start. Time will drag. Nothing will happen. Everything will be vague and many ideas will be floated. You will feel like a broken record, repeating yourself with each phone call or e-mail you send. Don't give up. You are laying the groundwork for decisions to come.

Committee Deadlines

No major K-12 decisions will be made until the third committee deadline in April, if history is guide. The House and Senate K-12 committees must produce their omnibus bills by this deadline.

Spending Targets

Before the third committee deadline, the House and Senate leadership will set spending targets for each area of the budget, including K-12 spending. The bills produced by the House and Senate Education Finance Committees must stay within these spending targets. This is a key decision point. Strong efforts must be made to let legislators know schools are your top legislative priority.

Conference Committees

After the House and Senate pass their respective education funding bills, a conference committee is appointed to develop a compromise. Conference committees are usually composed of five members each of the House and Senate. Their job is to negotiate a compromise Education Omnibus Bill to bring to a vote by both houses. It usually begins to meet in April, but may not finish until very near the session's end in May. Legislative leaders will set new spending targets for conference committees. Communicating with legislators during the conference committee sessions is very important.

Omnibus Bill

Once the Conference Committee finishes the Education Omnibus bill, it cannot be amended. The Conference Committee report must be re-passed by both the House and Senate before going to the Governor to sign or veto. The Governor may veto "line items," which means funding can be vetoed for a particular project.



Communication Tips

Letters, e-mail messages, and phone calls really can make a difference on an issue. The legislators represent you, the voter, and will take note of your concerns, ideas and opinions. It is most effective to develop long-term relationships and communicate individually with each legislator.

General Tips

Be Clear
Be Appreciative

Advocate clearly for your position. Listen to what the legislators have to say. Be appreciative of past support, and work done for K-12. Ask how you can help. Ask to be kept informed on progress on legislation related to education. Be polite and reasonable. Thank the legislator or aide for their time.

State your purpose at the outset. Suggest solutions or better alternatives. Use personal stories to illustrate points. Provide facts and examples.

Message

Tell Personal Stories
Define Concerns
Make Education the Priority

Keep your message simple. Tell your legislator that you:

- value your district's achievements
- support increased funding to maintain excellence, avoid cuts in programs and increased class sizes
- have education as your top priority
- support increased funding from the State

Include the bill number if you are referring to specific legislation. If your legislator is the author, thank them for their work.

Writing Letters and E-mails

Be brief, clear and complete. A one-page letter is best.

- Include your name and address on the envelope.
- Include your name, address, phone number and e-mail address on the letter or e-mail.
- Include a precise message in the subject line of the e-mail, and note early in the e-mail that you are a constituent.
- Make the letter personal. Numerous e-mails or letters with the same content do not have much impact.

Telephone

Indicate your legislative district and your school district. Ask for the legislator. If that person is unavailable, give the staff person your message.

In Person

Schedule an appointment to talk with a legislator by calling their office. Identify yourself as someone who lives in the legislator's district. Taking the time to go to the legislator's office has great impact.



Speak Like a Legislator

It helps to speak the language of the lawmakers when discussing policy, or the progress of a bill.

The following terms are used in describing the legislative structure and process.

Adjournment

Close of a session.

Amendment

Any alteration made, or proposed to be made, in a bill or motion by adding, changing, substituting or omitting.

Bicameral

Two bodies of the Legislature: The House of Representatives and the Senate. In Minnesota, 134 representatives are elected to two-year terms in the House; 67 senators are elected to four-year terms in the Senate.

Biennium

The Legislature meets for up to 120 days over a two-year period: the biennium.

Bill

A proposal to create a new law, change a law or abolish a law.

Calendar

A list of bills awaiting final action by the House or Senate.

Chief Author

A legislator who sponsors a bill and whose name appears after the file number on the bill.

Committee, Ad Hoc

A committee appointed for a special purpose; automatically dissolves upon completion of the task.

Committee of the Whole

The entire membership of the House or Senate acting as a single committee with the presiding officer as chair.

Committee, Conference

A committee appointed to reconcile differences between bills passed by the House and Senate. It includes members of both bodies.

Committee, Interim

A committee delegated to study or investigate an issue. Usually does its work after the Legislature creating the committee has adjourned, and reports to the next regular session.

Committee, Joint	A committee comprised of members of each house.
Committee, Standing	The regular, ongoing committees of the Legislature that perform certain legislative functions. Each body establishes its own standing committees.
Companion Bills	Identical bills in the House and Senate.
Concurrence and Re-passage	The same version of a bill must pass both houses to become law. If changes are made and filed in the House after it passes the Senate, it must return to the House for passage. The same process applies to change made in the Senate.
Consent Calendar	A list of non-controversial bills that usually pass without debate.
General Orders	A list of bills awaiting preliminary action in the House and Senate each day during session.
Hearing	A committee meeting to hear arguments for and against an issue by concerned groups and individuals.
House File (H.F.)	A bill introduced in the House of Representatives.
Non-Controversial Bills	Bills requiring little debate that usually pass routinely.
Omnibus Bill	A bill that combines several, or many legislative measures relating to the same issue or topic. Most often the term refers to appropriation bills. The Omnibus Education Bill is a package of all bills concerning K-12 funding, programs and governance.
Reconsideration	Any member of the Legislature may ask his or her respective house to reconsider a vote, as long as that member voted on the prevailing side. A member must make the motion to reconsider within two meeting days of the original vote.
Revisor of Statutes	A legal authority office that puts bills into legal form, properly placing approved amendments into the language of the bill (a procedure known as engrossing), and updates the Minnesota State Statutes to include the new laws.

Fiscal Calendar

A finance bill that has had its second reading must be considered by the House when requested by the Chair of the Committee on Ways and Means or by a designee of the Chair. A bill related to taxes, or raising revenue that has had its second reading, must be considered by the House when requested by the chair of the Committee on Taxes or a designee of the Chair one day prior to actual consideration. After consideration by the House on the Fiscal Calendar, unless otherwise disposed of, the bill must immediately be given its third reading and placed upon its passage.

Senate File (S.F.)

A bill introduced in the Senate.

Sine die

Adjournment without a day being set for reconvening; final adjournment (pronounced sigh-knee die).

Veto Message

The message the Governor sends to the Legislature giving his or her reasons for vetoing a bill after it has passed the House and Senate.



Your Legislative Platform

Each district can create a work plan to represent its interests at the legislature. This “legislative platform” should be a clear representation of concerns and recommendations for action.

Research

Analyze Needs
Identify Decision-Makers
Identify Constituencies

The key to an effective legislative platform is to carefully analyze the needs of the district, the data on how legislation has affected the program and budget, and how legislative action can make the improvements needed possible. The constituencies and decision-makers who need to be involved should be identified. Those include elected officials, as well as groups with special interests who will likely support your interests. Identify elected officials who are most likely to oppose your interests and the reasons why. When that is completed, the plan needs to include goals, strategies, timelines and means to evaluate success. Study the AMSD platform and try to align your local platform accordingly.

Define Issues and Set Goals

Determine Needed Changes
Identify Solutions

Define what needs to change and how to change it with clear, concise descriptions and recommendations. Elected officials need a clear sense of what you want them to do. If you are not clear on solutions, actions taken by the legislature may not only fail to solve the problem, but may make it worse or create new problems.

Develop Key Facts

Distribute Information
Set a Timeline

Prepare information and key facts to provide supporters and legislators about your legislative plan. Develop a timeline including when to communicate with key elected officials, and when to engage supporters and volunteers.

Complete the Plan

Educate
Engage

Plan the work and work the plan. A good plan sets the path to success. Each step will educate elected officials and move towards solutions, engaging both voters and decision-makers in solutions to benefit public education.



School Funding Basics

School funding is very complex. Here are a few basic facts to help understand the key components and explain how it works to others.

Legislative Control

The Legislature controls K-12 funding in Minnesota and determines how much money public schools receive. For the most part, even local real estate taxes for K-12 education are set by the Legislature. Local school boards have little authority over how much money is available in their districts.

Funding Shortfall

Funding has not kept pace with inflation, the changing needs of student populations, or the ever-increasing performance expectations. Most metro-area school districts, and many others across the state, have been forced to cut programs, increase class sizes, and spend down budget reserves to make ends meet.

Formula Allowance

The Legislature sets an allowance, paid on a per pupil basis, as the primary source of funding. The formula allowance provides money for staff, textbooks, supplies, utilities, maintenance, and transportation. This is the most important source of funding for public schools.

Designated Funding

School districts receive funding designated for specific programs and building construction. These designated funds often provide only part of the costs incurred to meet state requirements (as is the case with special education) or are only available to districts of a certain size, like construction funds. Designated funds may be used only for the purpose defined.

Local Funding Support

Ninety percent of the districts in the state have successfully asked voters to pay additional taxes to meet shortfalls in funding for program or facilities. These are called referendums, elections to provide tax levies or capital funds.

Financial Information

Local school districts have state-required information on their finances. AMSD has financial data on its web site at www.amsd.org. A comprehensive guide to Minnesota's school funding system by the House Fiscal Analysis Department is available at www.house.leg.stat.mn.us/fiscal/files/04fined/pdf.



How to Set Up an E-mail Information System

When events at the Capitol are moving quickly, it's essential that legislators are contacted immediately. That's when an e-mail alert to your list of parents will get the job done fast.

Recruit

Recruit contacts from your district's parent groups, citizen advisory committees and staff. Also identify those who will telephone legislators, write letters, testify or visit legislators. Collect e-mail and set up group email distribution list.

Select "Starter"

Establish who will be the e-mail "starter."

Send Action Message

The "starter" will write a succinct, written message of the action needed. A sample message may be sent from AMSD.

Get Confirmations

Have each person on the list copy the designated "starter" with copies of the e-mail or confirmation of calls to have a record of actions taken.

Provide Updates

Provide everyone with a copy of the distribution list so they can see the overall picture and the importance of their role in making it work. Keep each participant updated on your issues throughout the legislative session. Give notice when deadlines are approaching so your volunteers will be prepared to respond quickly.

Check Progress

Develop a system to check how well your e-mail distribution list is working. Get feedback from volunteers and share what others are doing with everyone for ideas. Ask people on the list to share responses from legislators.

Encourage

Thank and encourage participants.



Minnesota Miracle

Legislation introduced by Rep. Mindy Greiling and Sen. Terri Bonoff in 2008 represented the work of P.S. Minnesota, a non-partisan coalition of Minnesota education and parent groups united to advocate for adequate and sustainable public education funding. Below is a summary of the major components of the bill.

Minnesota Miracle Goals

- Sets the basic per pupil formula high enough to cover districts' basic instructional needs while having it match specific additional needs.
- Fully funds the state's share of special education costs.
- Increases funding for school district facility needs.
- Provides equalization in school property tax.

Funding Formula Details

- All students will be counted as 1.0, including kindergartners.
- End current per pupil weighting by grade level.

Allowance Increased

- Continues to fund school districts and charter schools based on the number of students served, not on the number of pupils resident in the district.
- Increases basic formula allowance from \$5,124 per adjusted student pupil unit to \$7,500.
- Indexes the basic education formula allowance to rate of inflation, as measured by the gross domestic product (GDP) implicit price deflator for state and local services.

Compensatory Revenue

- Provides additional funding to schools that serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Limited English Proficiency Revenue Expanded

- Links LEP funding amounts to the basic formula allowance.
- Eliminates LEP funding limit of 5 years for any one student.

New Declining Revenue Formula

- Creates new component of general education revenue called “declining enrollment revenue.”
- Revenue equals the greater of zero, or the formula allowance times the difference between the three-year average enrollment and the current year enrollment.
- Under current law, a portion of the a single year’s loss in enrollment is built into each district’s pupil count.

Location Equity Index Revenue Established

- Location Equity Index (LEI) increases funding for school districts in counties with above-average cost of living as measured through wage and housing data.
- Sets the formula equal to 50 percent of the basic formula allowance times the greater of 1.0 or the count index for school district.

Sparsity Revenue Modified

- Goes to small, geographically-isolated school districts.
- Lowers the minimum sparsity from 19 to 15 miles.
- Keeps the requirement qualifying schools that both serve small numbers of students and are a minimum distance from the nearest school.

Other Reserves: Streamlines General Education Revenue

Eliminates the following revenue components:

- Training and Experience (T & E)
- Equity
- Pension Offset
- Gifted and Talented
- Q-Comp

Referendum Offset

- Offsets each district’s referendum revenue by \$500 per pupil and adds \$500 per pupil to the basic formula allowance.

Special Education

- Removes statewide special education basic revenue cap so each school district receives from the state the full formula amount of 68 percent of its eligible special education costs.
 - Removes statewide cap of excess cost revenue for special education.
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Transportation

- Creates new hazardous conditions pupil transportation aid.
- Districts determine hazardous conditions.
- Total aid limited to not more than 20 percent of the district's to-and-from transportation costs.
- State aid of 5 percent of the district's total costs for bus purchases.

School Facilities Needs

- Authorizes every school board to levy for the cost of deferred maintenance needs (now only the very largest school districts can do so).
- Increases debt service equalization aid.
- Provides an agricultural school bond credit to lessen the impact of school building projects on agricultural lands.

Property Tax Reductions

- Enhanced equalization levels established for the major school funding formulas.
 - Equalizing factors indexed to the statewide growth in tax base.
 - School taxes are reduced by eliminating levies for operating capital, equity, transition, and Q-Comp by enhancing equalization levels, and by offsetting \$500 per pupil of referendum revenue.
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How Can AMSD Help Me as a Citizen Lobbyist?

The Association of Metropolitan School Districts (AMSD) is an organization lobbying for the needs of schools and their students in thirty three K-12 metropolitan school districts as well as two intermediate districts. These districts serve nearly 315,000 students, nearly 40 percent of the students in the state.

Public Presence

Legislature
New Media
School Districts

AMSD has been a leader in calling for adequate funding for public schools. Representing 39.1 percent of the students in the state, AMSD works to help legislators understand the issues and challenges facing its member districts and their students. It informs the news media in providing timely and factual information to the public.

Facts vs. Rhetoric

Data
Research

AMSD provides the data to show what the legislation really means, how rhetoric sometimes misses the truth about funding, and what the impact of legislation is on schools and students.

Information is made available year-round through legislative updates, the monthly newsletter, position papers, news items, financial data and analysis of bills. Links are provided to other organizations and the legislature all at www.amsd.org.

Action Reporting

AMSD staff is at the legislature following the action and making information available as events occur via internet and e-mail updates.

Lobbying Support

Organizing
Information
Tours

AMSD staff is available to help parents and community members learn how to work with their legislators and organize citizen lobbying groups. Tours of the Capitol and meetings with legislators can be arranged. Contact Scott Croonquist, AMSD Executive Director, for information.