Conducting Visits with Members of Congress

Being an effective child advocate requires building strong relationships with our members of Congress and their staff members. It is important to use every opportunity to reach out and maintain these relationships. Meeting with your members and letting them know what policies are important to you, your school, and your community is an important step in building this relationship.

You can meet with your members of Congress either in their Washington, D.C., office or their district office. You should be aware that most congressional meetings are taken by one of their staff members, who then relay pertinent information on to the members of Congress. Below are some tips on how to schedule and meet with your elected officials.

Before Your Visit

Scheduling

You can schedule individual or group visits with your member of Congress. Out of professional courtesy, most members will not meet with constituents from other states or districts, so only schedule meetings with your own district member. To find your member’s contact information, please visit the PTA Take Action Center at pta.org/takeaction.

*Note: If you are a State PTA president or president-elect, a federal legislative chair, or are otherwise representing your entire state PTA, you may schedule a visit with any member within your state, regardless of whether you live in his or her district. However, the visit will have more impact if you include at least one member of a PTA located in the district in the meeting. Additionally, the online meeting request forms located on most members’ websites may automatically flag you as “out of district.” Therefore, it is important that you initiate these meeting requests over the phone or through a direct email with the scheduler.

When you call the congressional office, there are a few things to know. If you are calling the district office, you should ask for the scheduler to request a meeting with the member while he or she is in the district. If you are calling the Washington, D.C., office, you may ask for either the scheduler, if you are requesting a meeting with the member; or if you would like to meet with a legislative aide (LA), you may ask to be transferred to the LA handling the issue you wish to discuss. Try to request a meeting between 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. for both the district and Hill visits. Identify who you are, who you represent, and who will attend. Indicate what you want to discuss with the member or his or her staff. Different offices will respond more quickly than others. If you are in Washington, D.C., and scheduling multiple visits in one day, take special consideration when traveling from the House to the Senate offices or vice versa, as it is a 15-minute walk. The day before the appointment, call to confirm.

Do Your Research

Learn about your member of Congress, his/her priority issues, and the committee(s) on which he or she serves. Bring local statistics and facts about your state PTA’s influence on the issue that you will be discussing during your meeting. You should become familiar with National PTAs public policy priorities, which can be found in the PTA Public Policy Agenda at http://www.pta.org/advocacy, which includes research, statistics and rationale supporting its recommendations. Know how the official’s support has helped in the past on these issues, or could help in the future. A simple internet search can provide you with information on your member’s position, priorities, and voting record. Additionally, we encourage you to contact a member of the National PTA Government Affairs staff to assist in providing you with any pertinent information prior to your meeting.

| Identify yourself and what organization you represent |
| Ask for the scheduler or the LA you would like to meet with |
| Request a time between 8:30 am and 5 pm |
| Indicate the topic of discussion |
| Take special consideration of time for multiple visits in one day |
During Your Visit

Arrive early
Arrive 5 minutes early, and be patient if the member is running late or gets called away during the meeting. In the D.C. office, when Congress is in session, elected officials and their staff have an extremely busy schedule and it is not uncommon for meetings to be interrupted. If this occurs, continue your meeting with staff and leave behind information about your local programs and PTAs' public policy agenda. If you happen to be running late, please call the Congressional office and let them know.

State the Purpose of Your Visit
After the initial handshakes and introductions, tell the member of Congress that you are a member of National PTA, who you're with (state, local unit and school), what you want to talk about, and why. When advocating for a specific bill, know the title, number, and status of the bill. In a direct and polite manner, tell your member of Congress what action you would like to be taken on the bill. Remember to be brief and to the point. The entire visit should not take longer than 20 minutes.

Make it Local
All politics are local. Be sure to connect the issues you are discussing to what's happening in the member of Congress' state and district. Give local statistics, facts and success stories to back your point. Explain how your community and the policymaker's constituents are affected and how PTA addresses these issues.

Listen, Respond, and Don’t Argue
Listen carefully to what your member of Congress or their staffer has to say and allow them to state their opinion and position on the issue. If the elected official does not agree with your position, don't argue or make a future enemy. Simply identify issues of concern or differences of opinion and respond based on your knowledge and experience. Remember you are trying to build a relationship, so don't alienate someone who may be your future supporter.

If you don't know the answer to a particular question, just say so and promise to get back to them with an answer. National PTAs Office of Government Affairs can offer support, if needed.

Wrap-up the Meeting
Summarize your key points and positions. Give the member of Congress supportive information, fact sheets, and your contact information. Thank the elected official for their time and leave promptly.

After Your Visit
Follow Up
Be sure to send a thank you letter to the member of Congress and their staff. Remember that you want to develop and maintain a relationship with your elected official and their staff—so stay in contact, send periodic information and updates, invite them to visit your school or program, and thank them for future votes in favor of your position.

Keep National PTA Informed
Let National PTA know how your visit went and where your member of Congress stood on the issues you discussed. You can access an Advocacy Activity Form at pta.org/takesaction under the actions section. This gives National PTA staff in Washington additional insight into the positions of members of Congress and helps us identify strong supporters and those that need additional attention or information, as well as PTA members who have good relationships that can be called upon in the future.