

5 Rules of Effective Advocacy

Effective advocacy is an art. There is no single “right” way to conduct advocacy. Instead, every campaign will take on different methods and styles based on the issue, the audience and the leadership of the cause. Below are tips for success in advocating for your school, based on my experience in advocating on local school issues. Incorporate these as you see fit, but bear in mind that individual circumstances will differ.

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1. Be Organized

- Every campaign needs a leader (or two). Someone needs to be responsible for developing arguments, spreading the word with supporters, organizing attendance, etc. The first step in success is finding this person.
- Get the word out to the community. If the issue is a high school issue, go to the feeder schools to discuss it. With construction in particular, it will be the future classes that benefit from the project, not current students.
- Keep your community focused on one issue or one goal at a time.
- Make it easy for community members to provide support. Develop a one paragraph summary of the issue. Draft emails for people to send to the BOE and County Council. *It is OK for the emails to be “form” emails. The key is to have your representatives see the same message from a broad group within the community.* Don’t erect a barrier to participation by asking your supporters to be original.

2. Be Knowledgeable

- There is no substitute for knowing your issue well. Make sure you gather facts from the information MCPS releases.
- Conduct independent research as well. Use anecdotes to illustrate your points.

3. Be Memorable

- Sound bites and slogans are used for a reason: because they work. Develop a short-hand that your supporters can use. Don’t worry about the details; your leader can address the nuances of your argument.
- Repetition is the key to getting government attention. Generate dozens or hundreds of emails at the key times. Ask people to copy the leader on emails, so you can track how many are sent.
- In oral testimony, try to have a “conversation” with the panel you are addressing. Avoid just reading from written testimony. Focus on the issue or argument that is most important for the moment.
- Cultivate relationships with reporters (Gazette, in particular). They need stories and you want attention. It can benefit both of you.

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4. Be Persistent

- The BOE and the County Council hold numerous meetings, forums, “town halls” etc. Use these events to bring attention to your issues. Don’t just testify at the BOE and disappear.
- Look for as many allies as you can. Town or city councils, large HOAs, local businesses, etc. can provide effective support for your issues. Don’t limit yourself to the school PTA/PTSA community.
- Take a long term view. Most issues will take several years to address (and years to implement if you are successful).
- Communicate regularly with the community to remind them of the goal and of progress. Tell them the next steps they can take.

5. Be Respectful

- Lyndon Johnson said, “If two people agree on everything, only one of them is doing the thinking.” Remember that well-intentioned people can reach different conclusions.
- Issues rarely are addressed in one year. Even if you did not obtain the relief you sought this year, you can make progress and develop allies for next year. Don’t waste those gains by being bitter or mean-spirited.
- Whether they agreed with you or not, thank government officials for hearing your concerns. Theirs is a difficult job. Cultivate relationships; you may agree on the next issue, even if you disagree on this one.