

# Legislative Advocacy Network Study

Madeira School Board Planning Commission

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## I. PURPOSE

Assessing the District’s responsiveness, strategy, and overall “plan” in advocating for our district through our representative government is at the core of our study. Specifically, we sought answers to the following questions:

- 1) **What are the best practices in informing school communities of legislative concerns that impact public schools?**
- 2) **How could we work in Madeira to leverage community support for pro public school legislation?**
- 3) **How can we work with legislatures to ensure that Madeira City Schools retains local control of educating Madeira residents?**

## II. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH

The committee undertook planned steps in an effort to better understand the questions asked and to provide answers to the above questions (as well as questions logically raised by the above topics). We met and reflected on the questions asked, brainstormed ideas, and concluded that our research should involve a mixture of internal and external sources.

### Internally:

- 1) We **interviewed Kenji Matsudo**, as our administrative resource, for background as to the topic at hand.
- 2) We **interviewed Pat Shea, School Board President**. Pat has been on the Madeira Board of Education for nine years, and was identified by Kenji as the designated member for all things legislative. We asked him the above questions, and followed up seeking his opinions and insights as to:
  - a. What has (and has not) worked in the past?
  - b. What roadblocks exist?
  - c. What is the current approach for working with the community and legislatures?
- 3) We **drew upon our own committee members’ experiences** with respect to non-profit legislative advocacy as well as our professional experiences with

school/legislative advocacy groups, as well as our experiences in dealing with legislative advocacy issues.

Externally

- 1) We **consulted with local professionals**. We sought input from a few former and existing school administrators locally to help us understand what has, and what has not, worked from their perspective, asking them “what do you do to communicate with your stakeholders?” and “how have you leveraged your community to support pro public school legislation?” We also consulted with non-profit organizations to determine which steps they do and don’t take with respect to legislative advocacy.
  
- 2) We researched **best practices**, nationally, to see if there was a growing consensus about what (if anything) districts are choosing to do to proactively address political and legislative issues as they arise.

### III. FINDINGS

***Issue #1 - What are the best practices in informing school communities of legislative concerns that impact public schools?***

***Finding? There is no consensus as to “best practices” in informing school communities of legislative concerns that impact public schools.***

Very few, if any, districts have a vetted, formal plan or strategy to inform their stakeholders about legislative and regulatory concerns that impact them. Those districts which address the issue at all: 1) formally rely upon lobbying groups/organizations, 2) participate in a consortium which informally communicates to the group about bills or regulations which do or may soon impact their districts and localities, and/or 3) have had an ad-hoc system develop to fulfill any needs.

Talawanda Schools in Oxford is an example of what can develop and be effective. Their recently retired superintendent, Kelly Spivey, recognized a few years ago that her district had unique legislative needs and concerns. In response, the district gathered a select group of stakeholders (parents, community members, board members) who would meet quarterly to review and address district concerns; within a few years, the group organically began to shift its focus to legislative issues. This, combined with her own regular legislative monitorings and district-wide communications, kept Talawanda much more informed and ready to engage in the process.

Local non-profits – even those who are perhaps more obviously impacted by changes to laws and regulations – frequently have no structured “alert system” as to communicating to their stakeholders potentially problematic (or even positive) changes. Two local non-profits were interviewed (both asked to remain unnamed in the report) – one relies upon an informal network of “moms” to “get the word out” about legislative concerns, heavily relying upon social media to communicate and advocate. The other does almost nothing.

**Issue #2 -- How could we work in Madeira to leverage community support for pro public school legislation?**

**Finding? – Having a “plan” in place to deal with any legislative push or alert which merits action, while keeping in mind “take no action” is the likely answer to almost all alerts.**

While little has been developed in the way of “best practices” which might have directed our recommendations, two ideas/themes kept popping up while we researched and reflected on this topic.

First, there is an obvious step the District can take to improve (or at least formalize) its communications with its voting stakeholders (parents, alumni, residents, employees, some high school seniors) thus generating support for pro-school legislation and regulation. It can prepare a formal plan to be referred to and used depending on the circumstances behind the call to action. We anticipate this *could* look like an “Emergency Action Plan” districts are required to have – a specific set of steps to implement depending on the situation. The “Plan” may or may not be detailed, but, like an Emergency Action Plan, would likely have a wide array of actions depending on the “emergency” (and whether or not the issue it was addressing was to *promote* pro-school legislation or *prevent* anti-school legislation, which by their very nature would engender different actions). Ideas for steps for this plan include: identifying “pro-district constituents”, communicating the ask/idea with them (through listserv, social media, flyers home, Cerkl, etc.) seeking support from/teaming up with like-minded districts, circulating petitions, etc.

But thinking about this plan and a theoretical call to action led us to this second pervasive theme: What constitutes an “emergency?” Keeping in mind that:

- few things get people more upset than politics, particularly today,
- there is no doubt that *everything* we are talking about, here, is “political,”  
and
- the District’s priority in all things election related is likely to always be routine (but critical) funding levies . . .

***then the critical step in any plan is to properly evaluate the urgency of the legislative ask at issue.*** If a very minor legislative alarm is sounded, the District probably does not want to expend its political capital advocating strongly for it one way or another.

**Issue #3 -- How can we work with legislatures to ensure that Madeira City Schools retains local control of educating Madeira residents?**

**Finding? -- Recruiting and pairing a District Employee or Advocate with our Legislator(s).**

The few districts which employ a strategy in this regard suggested increasing communication with local representatives *before* any ask is necessary. Some non-profits have a system of linking a key pro-district stakeholder to every representative within the district, sort of a legislative “buddy” system. Any future ask, or communication, with that representative will therefore be less of a “demand” and more of a communication flowing naturally from a friendly, prior relationship.

#### IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

There could be a good reason there is little data as to best practices for district-level legislative advocacy. It could be that rare is the topic/legislative concern which is so impactful that it warrants any *district* spending its precious political capital with its key stakeholders and legislators. Many fights are probably best left to a lobbying group or consortium so as to distance the district and risk alienating half of its levy-voters.

That said, there are a few steps we would recommend the board consider:

- 1) **Fostering a relationship with each of Madeira’s elected officials.** Be it a holiday card or a cup of coffee, purposefully and strategically having a senior member of administration or the board reach out and become acquainted with our local house and senate representatives (state but perhaps also federal, as well as perhaps state board of education members) seems like an easy and low-cost first step.
- 2) **Implementing a structured means to remain aware of key legislative issues.** We understand that the District has various ways and mechanisms which allow it to remain abreast of key legislative agenda items. Ensuring the continued flow of that information to a designated member of the board and/or administration is important.
- 3) **Consider implementing an “Emergency Plan” to deal with the rare advocacy emergency.** If warranted, having steps in place to: 1) alert constituents about the concern, 2) determine the specific “ask” of them (vote, spread information on social media, call your representatives, sign a petition, etc.), and 3) put the plan into action is certainly better than having no plan at all.

But any plan should keep in mind: 1) it should be flexible to deal with a variety of situations, 2) it will have to have an idea of who its “Friends of the District” are – that is, who are the persons the District will call into action to help with the advocacy task, and 3) it should constantly have restraints to require those seeking the “call to arms” be evaluating whether implementing the action is worth the political capital the action will cost.