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Legislative Advocacy for Graduate Students: Tips for Getting Involved During Your Training

As future school psychologists, it is important for us to understand and get involved in the legislative issues that continue to impact our future profession. Advocacy efforts are critical to making our priorities heard and incorporated into legislation that will shape the future of our practice. As graduate students, it might be difficult to think about doing anything beyond an already overwhelming schedule of demands; however, getting involved in advocacy can be as simple as sending an e-mail or making a quick phone call to an elected official. Through advocacy efforts, we can make a positive impact on children, families, school psychologists, schools, and communities at the local, national, and state level. Below is a list of suggestions on how you can become an effective advocate:

Familiarize yourself with the legislative process: Admittedly, many of us haven't thought about how a bill becomes a law since we were in our 9th grade civics class, or since watching Schoolhouse Rock on Saturday morning television. For a quick refresher on how a bill becomes a law visit <http://capwiz.com/naspweb/issues/basics/?style=legis>. A list of links to NASP legislative information and web resources is available at www.nasponline.org/students/legislative.aspx.

Identify your state SPAN (School Psychology Action Network) Coordinator: SPAN coordinators represent each state and assist in advocacy efforts on the state's behalf. Contact your state's SPAN Coordinator and find out how you can assist them with their efforts. A complete list of state SPAN Coordinators and contact information is available at www.nasponline.org/advocacy/spancoordinators.pdf.

Identify your elected officials and keep yourself up-to-date on local and national issues: The NASP Advocacy Action Center, available at <http://capwiz.com/naspweb/home>, has links to elected officials, legislative alerts, bills, and votes in each state. Check your local newspaper for articles reporting on both local and national policy issues. Additionally, you can read a weekly education policy update at www.edweek.org. Publications like this will target specific bills important to students and families and will enable you to find out how your elected officials are voting on issues important to you.

Visit your state association website: Find out if your state association has a link to state advocacy related information. A list of state school psychology association websites is available at www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/links_state_orgs.aspx. Ask your state to post a link to the NASP Advocacy Action Center (<http://capwiz.com/naspweb/home>).

Post state and national advocacy updates on the NASP Students e-Community: Provide local, state, and national legislative information to students across school psychology programs. Discuss student-related advocacy ideas and report on your involvement in advocacy efforts. You can join the e-Community at www.nasponline.org/communities.aspx.

Do a presentation on advocacy to students in your graduate program: Discuss local and national legislative issues affecting school psychology, children, and families, as well as what students can do to take action. Invite undergraduate and graduate students from related departments (e.g. education, psychology, counseling, family studies) and incorporate an advocacy activity into the event. Advocacy activities and tips are regularly published in the *Advocacy in Action* column in the Communiqué. Find compelling reasons for the importance of graduate student advocacy at www.nasponline.org/students/naspstudentadvocacy.aspx

Create a Student Advocacy Coordinator position in your student organization: The individual in this position could update students on legislative issues, as well as inform students on how to get involved in state and national issues. Student non-members can subscribe to SPAN at www.nasponline.org/advocacy/index.aspx or e-mail Jeff Charvat at JCharvat@naspweb.org.

Build a Student Advocacy Coalition at your University: Reach out to students across graduate programs (e.g. education, psychology, counseling, family studies). Send emails and initiate events for student-related advocacy (e.g. bake sale with handouts of state legislator's phone numbers and a list of talking points). Discuss creative ways to educate students on campus about public policy and legislative issues affecting college students, children, families, and the community.

Extra credit assignment: If you are a Teaching Assistant for a course (or if you need extra credit and want to propose an extra credit assignment to an instructor), have students research a specific piece of legislation, follow the legislation through the legislative process, write a letter to their state legislators stating their position on the legislation, or develop talking points and use them to call a state representative during a scheduled class break.

Write to your legislators: Visit the NASP Advocacy Action Center at <http://capwiz.com/naspweb> and send a message to congress or your congressional policymakers. The process is simple—the email text is already provided for you, and all you have to do is add one sentence to make it personal and therefore more effective. Send the action alert to others as well by clicking “Tell-A-Friend” and enter the email addresses of fellow students, professors, or

friends. You should also become familiar with the local educational issues that impact school psychology practice in your state. Search for the General Assembly for your state in a search engine like Google or Yahoo. This site will list all of the bills that impact children's mental health and education introduced within your state legislature.

Call your legislators: Calling congressional legislators can take as little as one minute, but the impact of several phone calls on an important issue can result in millions of dollars for needed programs important to our schools. Contact information for elected officials for each state is available at <http://capwiz.com/naspweb/dbq/officials>. For tips on communicating with elected officials and how to write talking points, visit <http://capwiz.com/naspweb/issues/basics/?style=comm>. You will need to visit your state's general assembly website to find the names and phone numbers of local elected officials.

Request a meeting with legislators: When you are in the Washington, DC area, you can e-mail your congressional legislators and request a meeting to discuss an important piece of legislation. You can take this opportunity to educate elected officials about mental health programs and funding needs important to students. You will be surprised with how receptive the staff will be to the information you provide. Be prepared with talking points and a handout for staff to take with them. If you need assistance preparing for your meeting, call your state's SPAN Coordinator www.nasponline.org/advocacy/spancoordinators.pdf or Stacy Skalski, NASP's Director of Public Policy (301-657-0270). If you are living or working in your state's capitol city, you can also visit your local elected officials working in your state's general assembly. You can find their contact information on the general assembly website and call your elected official to schedule a visit. Don't be discouraged if you are only able to get a meeting with a legislative aide or staffer. These assistants to your elected official regularly meet with constituents and provide full reports to the elected official on the "pulse" of their constituents.

Testify on behalf of a bill. If you live or can easily travel to your state's capitol, consider testifying for a bill that is important you. At the general assembly website for your state, you can identify bills of interest, review the text of bills, and track the progress of bills. Each bill is assigned to a committee for review, comment and a preliminary vote. You can watch the weekly schedule for when bills of interest will be heard before a committee, and testify in person. Testifying is easy and only requires that you appear at the designated meeting room shortly before the hearing begins and sign up to testify. When it's your turn, you will typically have 3-5 minutes to offer oral comment for or against a bill. It's a good idea to prepare brief talking points in advance and to present your brief comments in written form for the record at the completion of your turn.

Non-NASP Advocacy Resources and Information:

- **APA Graduate Student Advocacy:** www.apa.org/apags/advocacy/getinv.html
- **Education Week:** www.edweek.org; legislative news is available under the links, “States,” “Washington,” and “Law & Courts”
- **Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS):** www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/index.html?src=oc, visit the link “Press Room and click on “Federal Register” for proposed and final regulations
- **Public Policy Advocacy Network (PPAN) of the American Psychological Association (APA):** www.apa.org/ppo/forms/joinppan.html
- **The Committee for Education Funding:** www.cef.org/
- **The National Alliance of Pupil Services Organizations (NAPSO):** www.napso.org, links include “Federal Definitions” and “Issues and Advocacy”
- **US Department of Education Website:** www.ed.gov, visit the link “Policy” for information on legislation and regulations
- **US Department of Health and Human Services:** <http://hhs.gov>, visit the link “Policies and Regulations”

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