While AASA’s policy and advocacy team continues to work on your behalf on Capitol Hill and your state association does the same at the state level, your direct involvement in advocating for your own district is critical. This year’s election provides an opportunity for you to reach out to your legislators. You can now welcome the new members and help them learn about their role in your district’s success or congratulate the reelected legislators and help them understand why they should support your district in the next session. This toolkit provides resources to help you reach out and provide legislators with information on several key topics related to public education. Please use the letters and enclosures as templates for any other issues currently affecting your district and alter the messaging to best fit your needs.

When you work with your legislators, remember that it is all about relationships. Get to know your legislators and their staff, so they are comfortable listening to you and reaching out to you when they want your input or advice. Advocacy is a marathon, not a sprint; set a calendar alert to reach out to your legislator once a month to check in, so they don’t only hear from you when there is a key vote or when you need something. Make the relationship a two-way street; provide them with information that will help inform their decisions and let them know what is happening in your community.

The best way to teach legislators about what is happening in your district is to invite them to visit. Have them visit your schools to see the system they are investing in. Let them meet your teachers and administrators as well as your students. Let them know when your students win awards or your schools do something noteworthy. The best advocacy for your schools is continued excellence.

Please use these resources as a start, continue to reach out to us with any thoughts, suggestions, or questions, and know that AASA’s advocacy team is always available to answer questions, share information, and support your advocacy efforts.
Congratulations Letter to Reelected Legislator

[DATE], 2014

Dear [Representative/Senator X],

On behalf of the [district name], I would like to congratulate you on your reelection. I look forward to continuing the work from last session of supporting and strengthening public education in [state/district]. [Thank them for any help they provided previously]

First, please continue to feel free to visit any of the schools in our district to see the positive educational and co-curricular activities taking place throughout the district. [Talk about the mission/initiatives in your district]

The [school district name] serves as the center of the [district/regional] community. With [#] elementary, middle, and high schools, we educate [#] students every year. Some of the many exciting successes in our district include:

- [Include around three anecdotes of successes in your district, such as improving test scores, admissions into top colleges, or athletic achievements – target to the specific legislator, if you know of his or her interests.]

[Insert sections from below, depending on relevance to your state or district]

Public education is the backbone of our community, and the future of [community/town]’s workforce. Your support for our public schools will help keep [community/town] competitive and successful for years to come. Please email me at [your email] or call me at [your phone number] with any questions about [community/town]’s public school system.

Best wishes,

[Your name]

Enclosures:  
[ALEC and Education Policy]

[School Voucher Programs]

[Common Core State Standards]

[Budget Cuts and Public Education]
ALEC:

You have likely been approached by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) with the opportunity to join what they claim to be a “free-market think tank.” This is false advertising; ALEC’s agenda is to put corporations in charge of your decision-making. Please see the enclosed fact sheet on ALEC and its work in public education, and please think twice before joining this group or sponsoring any of their model legislation or reconsider your membership, if you are already a member.

School voucher programs:

[State] has/is considering/is considering expanding/etc. a school voucher program, allowing public education funding to go to private schools. These programs have not been shown to raise student achievement or improve educational equity, as proponents argue. Instead, they hurt the public school system and our community. Please see the enclosed fact sheet on school voucher programs and consider voting against these programs.

Common Core State Standards:

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are misunderstood and misrepresented by many in the media and public view. These standards do not lead to a nationalized curriculum; they are neither a curriculum nor a national take-over. The standards were developed and adopted by governors at the state level. CCSS also does not lead to an increase in testing; the testing is happening whether states are in CCSS or not. While it is far from perfect, CCSS means higher standards for [state] students. Please see the enclosed fact sheet on Common Core State Standards to educate yourself on these standards and what they mean for [state] students.

How budget cuts hurt public schools:

Following the Great Recession, many states have been slashing budgets to combat growing deficits. These budget cuts have done a great disservice to our public schools. We have had to cut [include details on tough cuts your district has had to make, and how they affect your students/schools]. Please see the enclosed fact sheet for some national data on how school districts have been hurt by these cuts and consider voting [against future tax cuts/for increased taxes for public education, depending on the issues coming up in your state legislature].
Welcome Letter to New Legislator

[DATE], 2014

Dear [Representative/Senator X],

On behalf of the [district name], I would like to congratulate you on your election and welcome you to the [state] [House/Senate]. I look forward to working with you to continue to support and strengthen public education in [state/district].

First, please feel free to any of the schools in our district to see the positive educational and recreational activities taking place throughout the district. [Talk about the mission/initiatives in your district]

The [school district name] serves as the center of the [district/regional] community. With [#] elementary, middle, and high schools, we educate [#] students every year. Some of the many exciting successes in our district include:

- [Include around three anecdotes of successes in your district, such as improving test scores, admissions into top colleges, or athletic achievements – target to the specific legislator, if you know of his or her interests.]

[Insert sections from below, depending on relevance to your state or district]

Public education is the backbone of our community, and the future of [community/town]’s workforce. Your support for our public schools will help keep [community/town] competitive and successful for years to come. Please email me at [your email] or call me at [your phone number] with any questions about [community/town]’s public school system.

Best wishes,

[Your name]

Enclosures: [ALEC and Education Policy]

[School Voucher Programs]

[Common Core State Standards]

[Budget Cuts and Public Education]
ALEC:

Now that you are a member of the [state] [House/Senate], you will likely be approached by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) with the opportunity to join what they claim to be a “free-market think tank.” This is false advertising; ALEC’s agenda is to put corporations in charge of your decision-making. Please see the enclosed fact sheet on ALEC and its work in public education, and please think twice before joining this group or sponsoring any of their model legislation.

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ALEC and Education Policy

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) claims to be a “nonpartisan public-private partnership of America’s state legislators, members of the private sector and the general public.” In practice, it is a conservative group with a membership composed of state legislators and corporate representatives. The group is funded primarily by corporations and vastly affiliated with the Republican Party. Corporations meet with state legislators, introduce model bills and vote on bills behind closed doors. State legislators in turn introduce these model bills in their statehouses. It is focused mainly on budgetary issues, but was also affiliated with the “Stand Your Ground Laws” that came under fire after the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and led to a decline in corporate membership.

In terms of education policy, ALEC's agenda is anti-public education, with an intention of replacing traditional public schools with privately-managed charter schools or private schools. They gain the support of parents by persuading communities that school choice is parent empowerment. At the heart of their agenda lies the aim to reduce the power and autonomy of local school districts and school boards. ALEC’s model bills for education include vouchers for all students or specific subsets and increased availability of charter schools.

Research has not shown voucher programs or charter schools to have a significant impact on student outcomes. Rather than improving the education of students in your district, these bills would push more public money into the hands of private entities with very little transparency or accountability.

Please think twice before joining ALEC. If you join, your name will be affiliated with supporting these and other poor legislative actions.

More information on ALEC and how threatens public education is available at http://aasa.org/content.aspx?id=33886.
Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards (known as Common Core) are a set of standards, currently for English and math that were developed at the request of a group of governors by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. They were then adopted by governors in 44 states and implemented beginning in 2010. They list what students should be able to do by the end of each grade, without offering a standardized curriculum or any required materials.

Common Core is misunderstood and misrepresented by many in the media and public view. The public opposition to the standards stems from these misunderstandings and the partisan rhetoric on the news. However, if they are fully implemented, the standards will lead to an improvement in education outcomes and increased equity throughout the country. The standards do not lead to a nationalized curriculum; they are neither a curriculum nor a federal take-over of education. The standards were developed and adopted by governors at the state level. Common Core also does not lead to an increase in testing; the testing is happening whether states are in Common Core or not.

While the new standards will lead to an improved educational experience for our students, proper implementation of Common Core cannot be completed in the first year. Teachers need time and professional development to understand how to teach these new standards and many schools do not have Common Core-aligned materials or the technology necessary to implement the assessments in this school year. The way to ensure the success of Common Core and of [State]’s students is to slow down on high-stakes testing and let teachers and administrators properly understand and implement the new standards.

[State]’s decision to [add where your state is with Common Core – delay, withdrawal, full implementation, etc. – and what that means for your district – praise the standards, call for more support or flexibility, etc.]
School Voucher Programs

School voucher programs allow the per-pupil funding that would go to a public school to follow the student to a private school of his or her parents’ choice instead. These programs can target students with disabilities, low-income students, students zoned for “failing schools,” or other subsets of students or can be available for all students.

The arguments for voucher programs are that they increase academic performance by encouraging competition and that they increase equity by giving all students access to the school of their choice. However, voucher programs have not proven to be successful in either realm. They have not consistently shown improved academic results. Reports on the Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Washington DC voucher programs have found little or no difference in voucher and public school student academic performance.

Voucher programs also do not improve equity; private schools are welcome to accept only the students they want, while the drop in funding for public schools would hurt the students left in public schools, who are some of the most disadvantaged students. They are also not equally available; vouchers are mostly only available to students in urban areas, not in rural areas where there are fewer private schools available. Vouchers leave behind many disadvantaged students because private schools may not accept them or do not offer the special services the students need. Voucher programs for students with special needs also lead to segregation of special education students, as private schools are not held to the same requirements as public schools regarding placing special needs students in general education classes.

Because they are not public schools, schools receiving vouchers are not held accountable like public schools. Private schools are not held to the same standards and requirements as public schools, including with testing, budget transparency, and open meetings. They also violate the separation of church and state, often putting public funding into religiously affiliated institutions.
A recent poll of the general public\(^1\) shows a continuing trend of opposition of vouchers. In 2014, only 37 percent of the American public supported vouchers, and 63 percent opposed. This trend has stayed steady over several years.

School voucher programs have not been shown to be successful in what they advertise and are not popular among the American people. Please oppose any [new/expansion] school voucher programs in [state]. Our students will be best served in a strong and supported public school system.

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\(^1\) Gallup/PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitude Toward Public Schools: http://pdkintl.org/noindex/PDK_Poll46_2014.pdf
Budget Cuts and Public Education

Funding for public schools comes primarily from state and local budgets. In [state], [insert details of your state’s budget breakdown here, from the attached excel file. Compare to the national average, if your state’s breakdown is very different, or if you think it will be compelling]. Following the Great Recession, many states have been slashing budgets to combat growing deficits. These budget cuts have done a great disservice to our public schools.

Recent studies from Kansas and Georgia\(^2\), two states that made some of the deepest tax cuts, show the effects these tax cuts have had on public education. These tax cuts coincided with lowered property values stemming from the recession. In Kansas, public schools have lost 665 teachers while gaining 19,000 students, leading to larger class sizes. The teachers remaining in the system have less training, due to professional development cuts. Supports for students have also been slashed while the at-risk student population has increased. Georgia showed similar results: 95 percent of districts reported increased class size since 2009 and 62 percent had cut elective courses since the tax cuts took effect.

To support [state]’s future, we have to invest in our students now. Providing a supported, well-trained teaching workforce and necessary services and supports to students will ensure our students graduate ready to succeed in college and the workforce. The way to strengthen our community is through these students.

Sample Op-Ed Celebrating Your District’s Success

[Date], 2014

The public school system is the backbone of [district/community]. Ensuring our children’s continued educational success is the most important way to keep our community strong.

Recently, there has been a barrage of negative media attention around how America’s public schools are “failing.” These critics of public education like to assert that academic achievement is stagnant, our kids cannot compete internationally, our schools are dangerous, unhealthy places or that vouchers are the silver bullet. This is not true for the nation, and it is not true for [district/community].

These advocates fail to acknowledge that our nation’s public schools are much better than in the past. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics found that public school students do as well as or better than their private school and charter school counterparts. These findings extended to students from low-income families. Among students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, public school 4th graders outperformed their charter school counterparts in reading and math.

[Insert a few points of pride for your district]

I urge every member of [district/community] to commit to ensuring academic success for every child in this district. Come to our monthly school board meetings, volunteer in a classroom, [list some other opportunities to get involved]. There are so many opportunities to contribute to the success of our students.

We have an exceptional generation of children in our public schools today in [district/community], and they should expect nothing short of excellence from all of us. I am committing the public school system to do its part and I look forward to working with parents, business and community leaders and our elected officials in making our public school district the best it can be. Stand with me in standing up for public education.