



Maryland
Association of Student Councils
mdstudentcouncils.org

MASC LEGISLATIVE DEPARTMENT'S

ADVOCACY HANDBOOK



LEADERSHIP

Learn how to enhance your leadership efforts in advocacy!



COMMUNITY

Maximize your abilities to aid you helping your community!



SKILL GROWTH

Learn new leadership and advocacy specific skills!

STAFF TESTIMONIALS

"Advocacy, and more importantly access, has the power to uplift whole communities."

MICHAEL GANNON

Legislative Director 2025-26

"Through advocacy, I have learned to champion all perspectives for inclusive policymaking."

VANESSA LI

State Legislative Affairs Coordinator 2025-26





TABLE OF CONTENTS

1) UNDERSTANDING ADVOCACY.....	1
2) NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM.....	2
3) SMARTING SMALL.....	3
4) TESTIFYING EFFECTIVELY.....	4
5) POLICY & ADVOCACY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL.....	5
6) THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS.....	6
5) PLANNING AN ADVOCACY VISIT.....	8
6) ADVOCACY IN ACTION.....	10
7) LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE.....	11
8) HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED.....	13



MASC believes that advocacy should be accessible to everyone, regardless of region, school, or background.

This handbook serves as a guide for all student leaders, new or experienced, in dealing with the lawmaking process, legislative advocacy, and leadership development.



Understanding Advocacy

Advocacy: the effort to bring about change in systems, policies, or practices through persuasion, education, and organized action.

Why It Matters

Advocacy can bring attention to problems that may otherwise go unseen. It can ensure that community and youth perspectives are part of the conversation, while driving improvements in equity, representation, safety, and well-being. Advocacy empowers people to lead and organize for meaningful change.

Types of Advocacy



Self-Advocacy

Speaking up for your own needs, rights, and experiences.



Peer & Community Advocacy

Supporting others and amplifying community voices.



Systems Advocacy

Working to change policies, structures, or institutional practices.



Grassroots Advocacy

Mobilizing people at the local level to push for change.

METHODS OF ADVOCACY

Public Speaking & Testimony

- Addressing legislative committees, school boards, or public forums.

Storytelling

- Sharing lived experiences to illustrate a problem.

Campaigns

- Organizing events, petitions, or social media efforts.

Direct Action

- Rallies, letters to legislators, meetings with decision-makers.

Collaboration

- Partnering with organizations or community leaders.



NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

At the most basic level is school administration. They execute the policies mandated by their local board and MSDE, managing the student population, interactions with community stakeholders, their staff, and facility. For students looking to get involved with advocacy, the school level is a good start. Most schools offer involvement in organizations such as **student council**, student advisory boards, or other representative roles in which students get a say in how school operations, events, or procedures are conducted. *Beyond school student council, you can get involved with your regional council, or us, the state student council!*



James Bennett High School, Wicomico County

COUNTY/CITY GOVERNMENT



Prince George's County Council Building

Maryland has 24 regional municipal governments, with 23 counties and one independent city (Baltimore). These local entities create and pass laws for their jurisdictions. This level is where educational policy is governed most directly by **local boards of education**. These boards follow regulations from MSDE while implementing policies that make sense for their school districts. Most local boards have a **regional SMOB** that is chosen or elected by students in the school system or via a regional selection process.

STATE GOVERNMENT

Maryland's state government is similar in form to the US government. Our legislative branch is called the Maryland General Assembly, which also has a House and Senate. In the US legal system, the power of education is reserved exclusively for the states. The **Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)** oversees educational policy in our state via the State Board of Education. MASC plays a critical role in electing the two finalists for the **Student Member on the State Board (State SMOB)**. The State SMOB is then chosen by the governor to represent the interests of all Maryland students on a statewide level.



Maryland State House

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT



U.S. Capitol Building

The federal government consists of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. For advocacy, the legislative branch is the most important. It is home to the United States Congress, a **bicameral body with a House of Representatives and Senate**. These two chambers work in tandem to create and pass laws for the entire nation. The House has 435 members and is more reflective of the population makeup, whereas the Senate has fewer members at 100 and represents the interests of the 50 states and their populations.



STARTING SMALL: SCHOOL ADVOCACY



Student Voice

Student voice is about making sure your ideas and opinions actually count in the decisions your school makes. Instead of just following the rules, you can use groups like the student council or special interest clubs to speak up about what needs to change, like school spirit events, cafeteria food, or how clubs are run. It's your chance to move from the sidelines to the huddles, using your own experiences to help make the school a better, fairer place for everyone.

Working with Administration

Think of your principal and teachers as the "managers" of the school—they are the ones who have the power to say "yes" to your ideas. To get them on your side, you need to be professional and prepared; this means sending a polite email to ask for a meeting and having a clear plan. Even if they initially say "no," don't get discouraged! Use it as a chance to ask what their concerns are so you can come back later with a better solution that works for both the students and the staff.

To	[Administrator/Principal/Faculty Member Email]
Cc	[Co-Officers] [Student Council Members] [Advisor/Sponsor]
Subject	[Topic of Issue] OR [Meeting Request]

Dear [Title; e.g. Principal] Name,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is ____, and I serve as [position name] for the [your organization name]. We were hoping to meet with you regarding [issue/meeting topic] on [date of meeting]!

We will meet with you for [length of meeting] minute discussion about [purpose of meeting; give more specific details].

Thank you so much for the incredible work that you do for our students and we hope that we are able to meet with you!

Warm regards,

Name
Position

Mobilizing the Community

Mobilizing is just a fancy way of saying "getting everyone involved." One student asking for a change is a start, but when you get a whole group of friends, parents, and teachers to support your cause, the school has to listen. You can do this by starting a petition, sharing your story on social media, or even just talking to people in the halls to explain why an issue matters. When you bring the whole school community together, you turn a small idea into a big movement that's hard to ignore.



TESTIFYING EFFECTIVELY

What is Testimony?

Testimony is a prepared statement, written or spoken, delivered to a governing body to communicate your perspective on an issue. It typically combines personal experience with data/research to make a persuasive case.

Before You Write

- Choose a topic you are passionate and knowledgeable about
- Research the issue: policymakers often have the data; what they don't have is your story
- Know your specific ask: what action do you want them to take?

Structure of a Strong Testimony

Introduction

- Greet the body/person by name and title
- Introduce yourself: name, affiliation, role, location, and purpose.

Overview of Policy & Issue

- Explain the policy you are speaking on and why.

Personal Anecdote

- Share your personal story to make the issue concrete and human.

Quantitative Data & Evidence

- Weave in statistics to show your experience reflects a larger pattern and is rooted in fact.

Closing & the “Ask”

- Restate your key point in one sentence
- Deliver a clear call to action—tell them exactly what you want
- Thank the body for their time

Why Personal Stories + Research Matter

- Policymakers already have access to data. What they don't have is your lived experience. **Personal stories make abstract policy concrete** and build an emotional connection that statistics alone cannot.
- Data shows that your experience is not isolated and instead **reflects a pattern that demands a systemic response.**
Tips for using research effectively:
 - Use recent data from credible sources: government agencies, universities, peer-reviewed journals, established nonprofits
 - Corroborate claims with multiple sources
 - Always cite your sources
 - Keep statistics brief and tie them back to your story

Committee vs. Lobbying Testimony

Committee Testimony (Public)

- Open to the public; sign-ups posted on government websites
- Limited slots — sign up early
- Typically 2 minutes or less
- Usually restricted to one bill or topic

Lobbying (Private Meeting)

- Private meeting with a legislator or their staff
- Scheduled in advance; length varies
- Can cover a range of related issues
- More conversational; allows for back-and-forth



Policy & Advocacy at the Local Level

Most policymaking is done locally. Everything from school, road, and traffic light policy is developed and governed at the local or municipal level. Because local government plays the most direct role in all of our lives, advocacy here is most critical in enacting meaningful changes that can be made overnight.

Testifying at a Board Meeting

The most common way to influence education policy at the local level is through your county/city board of education (BoE). Most boards will allow you to sign up for public comment. It is important to keep in mind the following when choosing to testify locally:

- **Choose Strategically:** BoEs will list the topic for each meeting on their respective website. Most meetings where testimony is applicable are called open business meetings. It is a good rule of thumb to preview the agenda for the meeting to see what is being discussed. Agendas are typically accessible via the board website.
- **Be Timely:** Sign-ups tend to open a week beforehand and are limited to a certain number of spots. Take initiative and sign up early!

Understanding the Budget

It is a common misconception that BoEs directly control the level of funding a school district receives. This is untrue; boards are **allocative** bodies, meaning they simply distribute the funds based on their understanding of current affairs. They receive their funding from the **governing body of the local jurisdiction**, this can be a county council or city council, among others.

These bodies collect tax revenue from local residents and budget money for their school districts, typically choosing to earmark 50% of all revenues for the school system. While the BoE controls **where** the funding goes, they do not decide **how much** of it they get.

When developing your testimony, keep this process in mind. You might choose to go advocate directly to your jurisdictional governing body rather than your BoE if you are only concerned with the quantity of funding bestowed to your school system. BoE testimony should be conducted in the context of educational policy—curriculum, facilities and infrastructure, school boundaries, dress code, homework, mental health days, etc.—and how much money the board gives to each area.



Overview

THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS



➤ What is a Bill?

A bill is a proposed new law. Bills are written by legislators and their staff using formal, technical language. Before becoming law, a bill must pass through both the legislative and executive branches.

1) In the House

- A legislator introduces the bill.
- The presiding officer (Speaker of the House) refers it to a relevant committee.
- The committee reviews it and issues a report: favorable, unfavorable, or favorable with amendments.
- The full chamber votes. A majority passes it to the other chamber; a majority against kills or stalls it.

How a Maryland Bill Becomes Law

2) In the Senate

- The same process repeats. The Senate's presiding officer (Senate President) assigns the bill to committee, which reviews and votes before it proceeds to a full floor vote.

3) Final Steps

- Conference Committee (if needed): A joint panel of members from both chambers negotiates a single compromise version that both must pass.
- Governor's desk: The governor signs the bill (it becomes law) or vetoes it. A veto can be overridden by a two-thirds vote in both chambers.

Note: A bill can be introduced in either chamber, but all spending bills must originate in the House; the U.S Congress follows roughly the same process as above.



Reading & Understanding Bill Language

Key Things to Look For

- **Title and Bill Number:** System identifiers
- **Sponsors:** Legislators actively supporting/introducing the legislation
- **Preamble / Introduction:** Outlines context and purpose
- **Clauses:** The specific actions or requirements the bill creates and what must be done to implement them

The diagram illustrates the structure of a bill document. On the left, a box contains the bill's metadata and title. On the right, a larger box shows the operative and enacting clauses. Red arrows point from labels to the corresponding parts of the document.

Bill Number: HOUSE BILL 337

Sponsors: By: Delegates Moon, Allen, and Phillips
Introduced and read first time: January 19, 2026
Assigned to: Ways and Means

Title: A BILL ENTITLED
1 AN ACT concerning
2 School Construction and Housing – School Zones and A
3 Ordinances

Preamble / Introduction: 4 FOR the purpose of requiring each county board of education
5 the Department of Planning and the Interagency
6 Construction each year; prohibiting certain adequate
7 from delaying the processing and completion of subd
8 plans; authorizing certain adequate public facilities ordi
9 of final permits; and generally relating to school zone
10 adequate public facilities ordinances.

Amendatory Clause: 11 BY adding to
12 Article – Education
13 Section 4–148
14 Annotated Code of Maryland
15 (2025 Replacement Volume and 2025 Supplement)

Operative Clauses: 16 (A) ON OR BEFORE JULY 1, 2026, AND EACH JULY 1 THEREAFTER, EACH
17 COUNTY BOARD SHALL SUBMIT A STUDENT RESIDENCY AND SCHOOL ZONES REPORT
18 TO THE DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND THE INTERAGENCY COMMISSION ON
19 SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION.
20 (B) (I) THE STUDENT RESIDENCY AND SCHOOL ZONES REPORT SHALL
21 INCLUDE:
22 (II) THE SCHOOL ZONE BOUNDARIES AND ATTENDANCE AREA
23 MAP;
24 (C) THE LOCATION OF EACH STUDENT'S RESIDENCE; AND
25 (D) THE STATE-RATED CAPACITY, STUDENT POPULATION, AND
26 CAPACITY PERCENTAGE OF EACH SCHOOL IN THE COUNTY.
27 (E) THE REPORT MAY NOT INCLUDE PERSONAL IDENTIFYING
28 INFORMATION OF A STUDENT.
29 (F) THE INTERAGENCY COMMISSION ON SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION SHALL
30 ADOPT REGULATIONS ESTABLISHING FORMATTING AND SUBMISSION
31 REQUIREMENTS FOR THE STUDENT RESIDENCY AND SCHOOL ZONES REPORT.

Enacting Clause: Article – Land Use
7-106.
A COUNTY'S ADEQUATE PUBLIC FACILITIES ORDINANCE THAT RESTRICTS
HOUSING DEVELOPMENT ON THE BASIS OF SCHOOL CAPACITY:
(1) MAY NOT DELAY THE PROCESSING AND COMPLETION OF
SUPERVISION OR SITE DEVELOPMENT PLANS; BUT
(2) MAY DELAY THE ISSUANCE OF FINAL PERMITS.
SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect June
1, 2026.

When Analyzing a Bill In-Depth

- Define key terms (some bills include a definitions section; others require outside research)
- Analyze each section for purpose, implementation, and real-world impact
- Compare with prior legislation to understand what changes
- Identify who is affected, positively or negatively



STATE & FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

PLANNING AN ADVOCACY VISIT

1

Define Your Purpose

- Choose 1–3 priority issues or bills to focus on
- Know your specific ask for each (vote yes, vote no, amend, fund, etc.)
- If representing an organization, align on a shared legislative platform

2

Identify Your Targets

- Research which legislators sit on committees relevant to your issues
- Prioritize undecided or persuadable representatives
- Prepare a list of names, offices, and contact info

3

Schedule Meetings

- Contact offices in advance by phone, email, or the legislature's scheduling portal
- Be flexible and professional, schedules change
- Confirm meetings the day before

4

Prepare Your Materials

- One-page leave-behind: your ask, key facts, and contact info, keep it to one page
- Talking points for each issue, know them well enough to speak without notes

5

On the Day

- Arrive early and dress professionally
- Bring printed materials
- If the legislator is unavailable, meeting with staff is still valuable; staffers have real influence
- Stay on topic and be concise
- Thank them for their time before leaving

6

Follow Up: Send a thank-you email within 24 hours; reference specific points from your conversation; provide any information you promised to send; and stay in contact; advocacy relationships are long-term



LOGISTICS & SPECIFICS

Scheduling a Meeting

To	[Legislator Email] OR [Staffer Email]
Cc	[Co-Positions] [Supervisors/Leadership] [Advisor/Sponsor]
Subject	[Organization Name] Scheduling Request

Dear [Title; e.g. Senator] Name,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is ____, and I serve as [position name] for the [your organization name]. We are excited to invite you [to an event/to speak with our student leaders] on [date of event]! [Overview of what organization does].

A group of # students will meet with your office a [length of meeting] minute discussion about [purpose of visit/policy or issues focusing on].

Thank you so much for the incredible work that you do for the students of [your jurisdiction, e.g. county, district, or state] and we hope to be able to meet with you!

Warm regards,

Name
Position

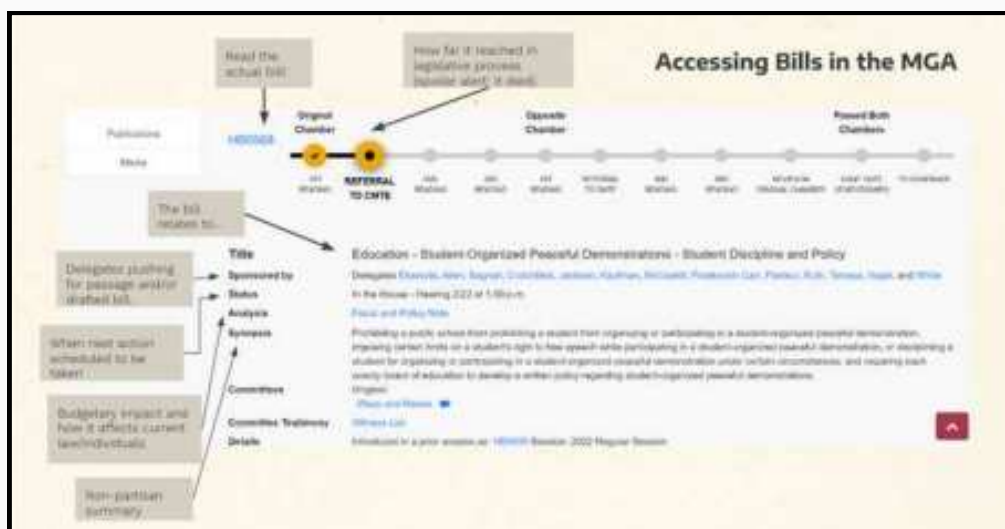
Tips & Tricks

- Use professional language when communicating
- Emails can be found on government websites; staffer emails tend to follow a typical organizational template:
 - **US Congress:**
firstname_lastname@legislatorlastname.chamber.gov
 - **MGA:**
legislatorfirstname.legislatorlastname@chamber.maryland.gov
- Be sure to follow up! Your email may get buried.

Bill Research

When conducting bill research, make use of the following platforms. You can filter by topic, committee, and more:

- State**
- <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/>
- Federal**
- <https://www.govtrack.us/>
 - <https://www.congress.gov/>





ADVOCACY IN ACTION MASC HIGHLIGHTS

1. Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)

Annual MASC report to the state board: events and supported legislation.

2. State Advocacy Day

MASC leaders advocate to state leaders and committees on key bills.

3. National Advocacy Day

MASC leaders advocate to federal legislators on Capitol Hill.

4. MASC Advocacy Week

Annual designation when regions across the state conduct advocacy activities.



Lessons From Experience

Words of wisdom from some of our experienced advocactes!

MICHAEL GANNON | LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR 2025-26



Persistence Is Everything

- Change rarely happens after a single visit or testimony. Bills die in committee, budgets get cut, and momentum stalls. The advocates who make the biggest difference are those who return the following session and build on prior work.

Do Your Homework

- Policymakers can tell immediately whether you've done your research. Know the bill number, understand the fiscal implications, and be familiar with counterarguments. Preparation signals that you're serious.

Legislative Staff Are Allies

- Staff are gatekeepers and have significant influence on how issues are framed and prioritized. Treat them respectfully, follow up reliably, and build relationships over time.

Your Voice Has Power

- Policymakers value community voices because advocates experience the systems they legislate—schools, infrastructure, funding—every day. No testimony or meeting is too small to matter! No idea is ever too small!

KRISH PUTTA | FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT 2025-26



Lean On Your Seniors and Upperclassmen

- They will give you the advice that you need to get ahead and to improve your speech and advocacy skills

Be Interesting

- Lobbying and Testifying is not just limited to you speaking. Bring something into the room (LIKE NARCAN). I remember I did a testimony where I literally told the staffer that my entire speech was written by AI. They listen to hundreds of these testimonies a day, do something that sets yourself apart.

Look The Part

- People respond to how you dress. Don't be afraid to wear a gimmicky tie or a nice suit; people will remember when you come back for the second time. Show your personality and show off your goofy side!

Have fun!

- Smiling and laughing and being excited will give you such a better experience and whoever your testifying to will feel that aura off of you and be just as ready to listen to what you have to say.



JORDAN SALKED | STATE PRESIDENT 2025-26



Get Creative

- Flexibility in policy implementation is essential: if a legislative vehicle stalls or a bill fails to advance, advocates should not treat that as the end of the road. Alternative pathways, such as direct engagement with MSDE (Maryland State Department of Education) outside of the MGA legislative process, can be equally, if not more, effective in achieving policy goals.

FORESIGHT OGUNGBE | SLACER 2025-26



Balance Listening & Speaking

- It is critical that you listen just as much as you speak, because understanding others can make your advocacy stronger and helps you understand where others are coming from. As a student leader, sometimes giving others the time and space to express themselves before you feel the need to can enhance your own understanding of advocacy.

HALI DUONG | CHIEF OF STAFF 2025-26



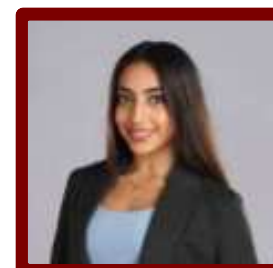
Don't Take "No" For an Answer

- When a legislator, administrator, or decision-maker declines your initial request, treat it as an opportunity to regroup rather than a final verdict. Ask clarifying questions to understand their concerns, find common ground, and return with a stronger, more targeted argument. Building relationships over time, even with those who oppose your position, can turn a "no" into a "not yet," and eventually into a "yes."

Be Open-Minded

- Advocacy and legislation mean working with people who see things differently. Conflict is inevitable, but it can be productive. Staying open-minded helps you find common ground, build coalitions, and recognize that the best solutions often come from collaboration.

ZARIA NAQVI | MCSS ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER 2025-26



Get Out of Your Comfort Zone

- It's important to be confident enough in your potential to believe you can do great things, and in order to achieve those things, you have to be willing to put yourself out there. I encourage every aspiring leader to take advantage of resources and continue to be ambitious! It is ok to fail and grow from the experience. The easiest first step I can recommend is to take advantage of all public speaking opportunities presented to you and practice meeting new people!



HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

1

STUDENT COUNCIL

- **School:** Run for schoolwide/class office, join exec, attend events!
- **Regional:** Apply for executive board, run for officer!
- **State:** Apply for MASC's appointed staff, apply to MASC committees, attend conferences, run for officer!
- **National:** Become a NatStuCo member school, apply for councils, attend conferences, run for officer!

2

STUDENT MEMBER OF THE BOARD (SMOB)

- **Regional SMOB:** Run for regional SMOB, join a regional advisory council!
- **State SMOB:** Run for State SMOB, join the state advisory council!

3

LOBBYING & TESTIFYING

- Do independent testifying on your own! Research issues, craft testimony, and present!

4

JOIN EXTERNAL YOUTH, POLICY, POLITICS, AND ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS!

- Be on the lookout for other organizations! They are always recruiting!
- Some include: Youth Institute for Policy, American Youth Association, youth political party organizations, and more!