

Communicating with leaders in your community

As a member of your community, you have a voice at many tables: your school board, your local officials, local businesses, and your legislators. Leaders in your community, such as elected officials, school leaders and business leaders can influence or make very important decisions that impact what early education opportunities are available to families. They need to hear from people like you with first-hand knowledge of the benefits of quality early education so they can make educated choices for your community.

Because leaders in your community may be in a position to decide or influence policies or funding for early education, it is important that they really understand why these programs are necessary for your family and other families in your community. They need to hear your story and the stories of other families to make the right decisions for Pennsylvania.



There will be times when you have to speak with these types of leaders – but there are also times when you can make time to connect with them. Preparing yourself to share your story with leaders and taking advantage of opportunities to connect with them can benefit your family and every family in your community.

Sharing your story with school officials and community leaders

School officials and community leaders care about whether children in your community are getting a good education, but may not always think about the first five years of a child's life. Sharing your story with school superintendents, principals and other school and community leaders helps them understand that a child's education begins at birth and that you care about the role quality early learning can play in preparing a child for school success. You can also reinforce that quality early education helps kindergartners enter school ready to learn and building partnerships with local early learning programs will improve children's school readiness. Here are tips for communicating with community leaders.

Determine what you want to say and identify your goal. Before your communication with a school or community leader, figure out what you want to say. Do you know how

educated or supportive the leader is of quality early education? What do you want the school or community leader to do? It can be something as simple as sharing information with their staff, community partners or other families, or more significant, like supporting continued investment in early education. There are thousands of reasons to support quality early education, but keep your message short and to the point and draw from your own experiences. Be clear what you want this person to learn from you. The worksheets in *Be Your Child's Champion* can help with this.

Find a way to communicate. There may be several different ways to communicate with a school or community official. Most school district and community websites will have a way to contact staff, like email addresses or phone numbers. There may be upcoming events, like back to school nights, school board or borough council meetings, where you can become more familiar with each person and their role. Once you have a way to communicate with a school or community leader, you can decide if you'd like to write an email or letter, request a meeting, or present at a future group meeting.

Make the connection. Share individual examples of businesses, families, schools or communities that have benefitted from early education and how quality early learning has impacted your and your child's life. Do you rely on a Keystone STARS provider for your child care? Does your child participate in PA Pre-K Counts or Head Start? Let community leaders know the role this program has played in your family and your child's success—and how important this is to your family and your child! If your child will soon enter kindergarten, let leaders know what important skills your child has been learning to successfully start kindergarten. If you have older children in school district, share how important skills they learned prior to kindergarten have played in their school success.

Highlight your involvement. Have you attended a recent event at the school or in the community? Do you belong to the school's PTO or PTA? Do you volunteer in the community or at the school? Sharing this involvement lets the leaders know you are invested in the community, the school and the decisions made that impact families and children.

Keep the message clear. Don't lose sight of the goal of your message! Use the *Be Your Child's Champion* Worksheets to help you keep your focus and guide you through your communications with community leaders.

Sharing your story with elected officials

Remember that elected officials work for you! It is their job to know what their constituents (you) want and need. Here are some tips to consider when communicating with your elected officials:

Find out who your elected officials are. If you want to communicate with local officials,

you can visit your local township, borough, city or county websites. For state legislators, you can visit the PA General Assembly website (www.legis.state.pa.us) and click on the “Find your legislator by address or county” box in the upper right corner. It’s better to use the “address” link since many counties are represented by more than one legislator. To find contact information for the Governor, you can visit the Governor’s website at www.governor.pa.gov. To find your U.S. Senators, visit www.senate.gov, and your U.S. Representatives at www.house.gov. You can learn more about these officials by visiting their websites, signing up for their newsletters, and asking your friends and family if they know them. Understanding the issues that are important to these officials can help you reach out to them in a way that will be most appealing to them.

Send letters, pictures, art work. You can send your elected officials a letter and include your child’s art work or send an email. To get the best results, use your own words! The more personalized your letter, the more interesting it is to the official.

Visit your elected officials in their district office. If you’d like to meet with your legislators, for example, connect with a Local Education and Resource Network (LEARN) partner from your county, reach out to your local Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC) chapter (you can find a list of chapters at www.pennaeyc.org) or talk to your early education provider – they can help set up a meeting and get you prepared. If you’d like to set up a meeting yourself, call the legislator’s district office closest to you and ask to speak with the scheduler. Let him/her know that you are a constituent (if you are a registered voter, that’s even better!) and that you’d like to share with your legislator how important early education is to your child and children in your community. You will probably have to be flexible since legislators have very busy schedules. Call again the day before to confirm your meeting. You could meet with the legislator and/or one or more of their staff. Usually these meetings are short (15 – 30 minutes) but if the legislator is really interested, you could have an hour or more! You may want to start the meeting simply by asking them if they have young children/grandchildren and if they know about the early education programs in your area. Then just share your story – feel free to bring artwork or other information to leave behind. After your meeting, send them a thank you note. You can include any other information you forgot to mention in your note, or answer any questions they had that you didn’t have the answers to at the time.

Thank officials for their support. Legislators always appreciate when they are thanked for doing something right. When you contact them, thank them for making early education programs possible.

In your story share:

- Why your child is special and what your child’s education means to you
- Ways that you help your child grow at home – activities that you do, ways that you help your child feel safe and loved and stay healthy

- The early childhood programs you participate in (list programs by name)
- How these programs help your child grow – learning letters, numbers, shapes, but also social skills, like getting along with other children, following directions and feeling more confident about being in an early learning program
- What these programs mean to you and your family
- Other families that you know that could benefit from these programs but are on waiting lists right now

Share your child’s progress throughout the year. Legislators don’t always understand the amazing progress young children make over the year when they have quality early education. Every two months or so, or when you are especially proud of your child’s progress, send a note to your legislators telling them the new things your child has learned, from letters, numbers, to how to play well with others. Include pictures of your child and family or art work from your child to really make an impression!

Continue the conversation.

Remember, you know much more about your child and early education in Pennsylvania than your elected officials ever will. When elected officials respond to you, answer their questions and give them more information on why early education is important to your community. It may take a while for an elected official to fully “get it,” so be patient and be available to answer questions.



Communicating with your Elected Officials

Meet Sarah

Sarah works full time and has two children. As a working mom she feels strongly that her children are benefiting from having a safe, nurturing, and friendly environment while she is working. When she first began searching for a child care facility, her local Child Care Information Services (CCIS) office helped her identify what to look for in a quality child care facility. Sarah decided to choose a Keystone STARS facility and has felt good about this choice, seeing her children grow and develop over the past few years.

One day while picking up her children, she received a flyer in her children's locker about Pennsylvania's Promise for Children (www.papromiseforchildren.com) which talked about how families and communities can help young children learn, information about Pennsylvania's early learning programs (such as PA Pre-K Counts, Head Start, and transition to kindergarten), and why everyone needs to help Pennsylvania's children reach their promise.

Later that evening, Sarah went online and visited the PA's Promise for Children website and discovered stories from other families just like hers who felt that having access to quality early education was important. It never occurred to her that there were families who didn't have access to quality settings! She also did not realize that the child care center her children attended received money from public funds to support the center. She knew the child care center participated in Keystone STARS, but she had never made the connection that this meant that they received public (state or federal) money, too.

Sarah reviewed the information for how families can get involved and found herself thinking how different her life and that of her children's might be if they didn't have access to quality early learning. She then decided to sign the declaration to support Pennsylvania's Promise for Children and sign up to receive emails.

While on the PA's Promise for Children website, Sarah also discovered Local Education and Resource Network (LEARN) partners in her county that bring together early childhood programs, families, school districts and child-serving organizations to assess what quality early learning programs are currently available in the community and develop ways to encourage quality early learning. Some partners



also work with school districts and community-based early learning programs to develop ways to make smooth transition from preschool to kindergarten for child, families and teachers.

Soon, she found herself wondering what she could do to help out other families and children in her community. She contacted one of the Local Education and Resource Network (LEARN) partners listed on the website and Sarah was provided with information as to how she could become involved.

Sarah also discovered she could contact her elected officials, for example, her state legislators. She had never written to anyone important, even a legislator, and had no idea how to go about it—she wasn't even sure who her legislators were! She wondered if her legislators would even want to hear from her. As she read other family stories on the site, she thought to herself, "I can do this, too!"

With Sarah's situation, you'll be able to see how Sarah used the questions in the workbook to identify the problem, what is working and what she'd like to happen (*My Thoughts*), how she prepares for the contact (*Setting up the Contact*), what happens during the contact, and the results of the contact (*My Reflections*). You can also see the next steps Sarah takes. The boxes reflect what Sarah wrote in her workbook.

Workbook: My Thoughts

Take a few moments before the contact with the legislator to consider the situation.

Remember: It's not necessary to provide a response to every question. Sometimes, it may even be helpful to admit that you just don't know the answer!

- What is working well in this situation is ____
- My concern is ____
- What I see in my children is ____
- This is how it affects my family ____
- This is what I have done or tried to do ____
- These are the results I've gotten ____
- This is what I think I would like to happen ____

Sarah's thoughts

What is Working

- *My family has access to a quality Keystone STARS child care program that my children love attending.*
- *I feel confident that my children are at a safe learning environment while I'm at work.*

My Concern

- *Without access to this child care, I wouldn't be able to work and my children might not be learning things they need to know to prepare them for success in school.*
- *I couldn't afford to pay more for child care—what would happen if this provider didn't participate with Keystone STARS? Would it cost more? Would the quality not be as good?*
- *There are families in my community who don't have access to quality early learning for their children!*

What I see in my children

- *My children are learning so much! Every day they are excited to share what they've learned at the child care center.*
- *They have learned how to play with others and follow directions—skills I know will be helpful when they soon begin kindergarten.*

This is how it affects my family

- *Access to quality child care allows me to work and to focus on my work while I'm there, without worrying about my children's safety or well-being.*
- *Access to quality child care has helped me as a parent to better understand how I can help support my children's learning.*
- *When I visited my CCIS office, I also learned about other resources that can help my family.*

This is what I think I would like to happen

- *I would like my legislator to understand how important quality early care and education are to not only my family, but for other families in my community.*
- *I want my legislator to know what a great job my child care center is doing! They are working really hard for families in our community.*
- *I would like my legislator to support quality early care and education and make it a priority when he makes decisions.*

Sarah's Setting up the Contact

Sarah used the PA General Assembly website to find out who was her legislator and discovered she could write an email, make a telephone call, or write a letter and mail it. Deciding to write a letter, she started writing her story and used the responses in her workbook to guide what she wrote in her letter—telling her story was much easier than

she thought it would be!

Still, she wondered if she'd really covered everything, so Sarah brought her draft to the Director at her child's program to see what she thought. The Director suggested including a picture of Sarah and her children, and maybe some of their recent artwork.

Sarah's contact with her Legislator

After the positive feedback from the child care Director, the encouragement from the Local Education and Resource Network (LEARN) partner and with the tools from the Pennsylvania Promise for Children website, Sarah mailed her letter with a picture of herself and her children and a drawing the children done that showed their favorite activity at school.

After sending the information, Sarah realized that she felt empowered. She was proud she'd taken the time to write the letter and hoped that it would make a difference. Most of all, she was surprised at how easy it was!

A few weeks later, Sarah received a letter in the mail from her legislator, thanking her for the picture and artwork. The letter stated how important the legislator felt it was to hear from people in the community.

Workbook: My Reflections

Sarah's Reflections

What I learned

- *I learned that I can write a letter to my legislator. Although at first, it was a bit scary, it was actually very easy to tell my story—I just talked about how this has affected my family!*
- *I learned it's important that my legislator hears from people in the community, and that my legislator does want to hear from me.*

What I need more information about

- *I need to know if my legislator actually supports investment in quality early learning for the families in my community!*
- *I want to know what I can do next!!!*

Sarah shared her letter with the Director of the child care facility and it was included in the center's parent newsletter!

Workbook: Next Steps

You can use this section to record what needs to be done next, by either you or the other person engaged in the conversation. If you're not sure what needs to be done next, you may want to discuss it with the other person during the conversation. That way, each of you will have a clear understanding of the situation.

- To get more information, I can contact ____
- What I will need to do next is ____
- This is when I will attempt to do this ____
- What I expect the other person to do next is ____
- This is when I can expect to hear from them ____
- This is how I will know the situation has been addressed or resolved ____
- If I need help from someone else, this is who I can contact ____

My Next Steps:

- *I want to contact my county's LEARN partners again. Although I don't have a lot of spare time, I would like to know what I can do to help other families in my community.*
- *I want to keep my legislator updated as to what families in my community are experiencing around quality early learning. I want to let my legislator know if things are changing—either for the worse or for the better!*
- *I want to talk with my friends and encourage them to write to their legislators and share their stories.*

Sarah discovered that a few of the Local Education and Resource Network (LEARN) partners from her county would soon be visiting the legislator in the Harrisburg office and they invited Sarah to join them to talk about the importance of quality early learning. Although Sarah was not sure she was ready to take that next step, she talked to a LEARN partner to discover other ways she could help.

In the mean time, Sarah decided to share with her legislator pictures of a recent Transition to Kindergarten event her family participated in...and shared how important this moment was for her family and others in her community.