



How to talk to your school board

By Dana Woldow

Public speaking is something that most Americans find intimidating, so you may not be eager to go before your Board of Education and speak during their public comment period, but it is one of the most effective ways to move your advocacy forward. It is well worth it to overcome any natural anxiety you may have about the process. Addressing the school board doesn't have to be intimidating; the key is to be prepared. Here is advice from a dozen experts who have all overcome their fear and made successful presentations to their school board.

Before the meeting

Find out what the procedure is for giving public comment. The executive assistant or administrative secretary for your Board of Education should be able to explain the procedure for you; to find contact information for your Board, look on the website of your school district. The school board may have their own link on the home page, or you may have to dig around for it – try the "about us" link, or type "board of education" into the search box if there is one.

Questions to ask include whether you need to sign up in advance to give public comment; where on the agenda public comment takes place; what the time limit is per speaker, and what the usual procedure is if there are more speakers than can be accommodated in the time set aside for public comment. In the latter case, it may be that the time allotted for each speaker will be shortened, or it may be that some speakers will be heard at the regular time and others asked to stay until the end of the meeting if they want to speak.

Also, be sure to ask if there is a procedure for having written copies of your remarks handed out to the board members. Your school board may prefer that all written materials be given to the secretary of the board, who will then distribute them to the individual members.

Expert advice: *"Give speaking to the School Board a "dry run". That is, go to a school board meeting prior to the time one expects to speak. That way, you can find your way to the actual site of the school board, determine parking possibilities, (or find a bus route, etc.). You can observe how other people speak before the board, including exactly where one stands when addressing the board and all the little mechanical things that can rattle people."*

Pay attention to the time limit per speaker. Nothing makes you sound less effective than having the timekeeper cut off your microphone in mid sentence!

Expert advice: *"Type out (double spaced with a big enough font to read easily) what you are going to say. Bring copies for each board member, for the board secretary, and the parliamentarian, and for the Superintendent."*

Practice makes perfect. Be sure you practice delivering your speech before the meeting.

Expert advice: *"Practice your speech out loud, even if you are reading it. Practice timing it, practice it in front of a mirror, and practice it to another person."*

"Practice at home with talk radio playing in the background. Practicing with unfamiliar jabbering helps prepare one for distracted board members, audience side conversations, and other such distractions. Often, people prepare in the vacuum of their home and it is really unsettling to then speak in a less-than-ideal context at a meeting."

Writing your remarks

Be mindful of the time limit for each speaker, and try to keep your comments shorter than the limit. Be prepared to cut your remarks in half if it turns out that there are many speakers; the chairperson of the board may decide to allot less time to each speaker in order to give everyone a chance to be heard.

Don't try to make more than one main point. The minute or two that you will be allowed to speak is not long enough to cover much territory, so you will make more of an impact using all of your time to support one idea, rather than roaming all over the place with multiple ideas.

Expert advice: *"Tell a story and let it make your point: "Two weeks ago I was on my way to... As I was standing there, I couldn't help but notice... And I wondered... It made me think that... So I'm here tonight to express my concern about... "*

Begin your remarks by addressing the board respectfully ("Honorable Commissioners") and stating your name clearly. Explain your affiliation (parent, student, community member, school staff) and then get right into your main point. Try to make your issue be about more than just your own school or your own small group – talk about how what you want will help many families at many schools, or all low income students, or all youth in your community. The broader the appeal, the better.

Don't make it personal. Your comments should be directed to the entire board, not just to one member.

Expert advice: *"Avoid the word "BUT"! As in, "I understand that Nutrition Services has to serve food that kids like, but I think that..." We are very conditioned to ignore the beginning of a statement/paragraph that starts out positive because we know that something negative will follow on its heels and we know that that part is what's actually intended to be communicated. You're not fooling anyone with the nice-talk lead-in. (As an experiment to prove my point on this, try going up to your spouse and saying something nice like "I appreciate when you load the dishwasher." Then walk away. Chances are he/she will stand there waiting for you to say, "BUT I wish you would also...") Instead, try making them separate thoughts, or even better, use AND when possible: "I understand the need to serve food kids like AND want to be sure the meal offerings are also healthy and nutritious."*

Know your audience. Try to present your idea in a way which relates to the school board's priorities. It is likely that one of their priorities is their budget; how will doing what you want impact the budget? Is there a way to frame your request as something which will benefit the budget? Other issues your school board might prioritize include higher test scores and closing the achievement gap between low income and middle class children, reducing absenteeism among students, lowering dropout rates, and sending more graduates on to college. Try to frame your argument in a way which shows that helping you get what you want will also help the school board get what they want.

Expert advice: *"Find out if your Board of Education has a mission statement or a strategic plan that you can read online. Underline any buzzwords or catch phrases they use and use them in your own speech to support your argument. If they talk about 'social justice', then YOU need to talk about 'social justice', too."*

Make it clear to the school board that you have some skin in the game. Don't just show up and demand that they do what you want; make it a joint effort.

Expert advice: *"The best way to get the school board to support your idea is to say, "I want to accomplish X; I will do A, B, and C, and all I need for the school board to do is D." Make it as easy as possible for the board to support your idea by showing that you are willing to do much of the heavy lifting."*

Get right to the point. Realistically, you can only count on people listening to you for about the first 10 seconds. If you haven't engaged their attention by then, you aren't going to later on.

Expert advice: *"Put your 'ask' right at the beginning, immediately after you state your name. Too many people begin by talking about themselves, or the organization they represent, or they ramble on about the history of the issue they are addressing. That is a big mistake! You want the board to hear first what it is you are asking for; then if there is time left, you can give all the reasons why this is so important, or talk about how many people your organization represents."*

When writing your remarks, think about who else might show up to speak on this issue, and what they might say. Is there both a pro position and also a con, and is anyone likely to take the opposite position from yours? If so, it may be worth it to devote some time to neutralizing your opponents' arguments.

Expert advice: *"Make an effort to get familiar with the counterarguments to your point of view, and craft a brief, civil and polished (yet devastating) response to them to include in your comments, so that you refute the argument before it's even made. This may take some Google research -- both to figure out (in cases where it's not obvious) what the likely counterarguments will be, and possibly to search for effective responses that others have made, which you can adapt. Keep it brief, clear, calm and confident."*

At the meeting

Be sure to show up well in advance of the time public comment is taken. Understand that the board can rearrange the agenda if necessary, and if public comment is moved earlier, you may miss it. Dress neatly and professionally, and make sure you are well groomed (hair combed, no three-day growth of beard.) Make eye contact with each person you are addressing.

Expert advice: *"Be polite and respectful even if you are angry."*

It is okay to read your comments, but do try to look up and make eye contact several times. Don't rush your words, which can make you sound slightly hysterical.

Expert advice: *"Start and end with a thank you. Try to make it meaningful."*

Consider bringing a child with you to deliver some or all of your comments. The advantage is that school board members are uniformly charmed by children and love to see them participating in the process; they may listen more closely to what your child has to say than to what another adult would say, and the audience is more likely to applaud a child than an adult, further reinforcing the importance of the remarks. If there are many speakers, it is possible that the others will allow your child to move to the front of the line. The disadvantage is that it can be a long wait for a child before the public comment portion of the agenda is called, and the child may lose enthusiasm for the project. Make sure you are prepared to offer distractions, a snack, a drink, if there is a long wait.

Try to stay calm as you wait for your turn to speak. It's really not as hard as you fear it will be.

Expert advice: Ten Steps to a Successful Speech *1. Take a breath. 2. Smile. 3. Identify yourself: Name, neighborhood / district you live in, grade(s) and school(s) your child attends. 4. Ask for what you want: Please vote ____ on _____. 5. Tell a personal reason why this is important to you. 6. Give a statistic, fact, or some kind of expert reason why they should give you what you want. 7. Show photo or graph – make sure OK with everyone in photo. Make sure it is large enough to be seen. 8. Respond to / correct an issue brought up by the other side, if possible. 9. Repeat a relevant quote (from someone famous – or from one of the Board members) 10. Repeat what you want, and say thank you."*

For more on making a successful presentation to your school board, read the section called "Attending a school board meeting" in [How to organize and mobilize to make change happen](#) and the section called "Hints for public testimony" in [How to be an advocate](#).

Return to ["How To Guides"](#) home page

Return to [PEACHSF](#) home page

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