

GUIDE FOR INTERACTION WITH YOUR STATE LEGISLATORS

- Be respectful – but also assertive & direct with your legislators
- Be specific in what you are asking them to do...make your story local – what are the impacts to your schools, your children, your community
- Be honest about what the concerns are...don't be afraid to paint the real, but scary picture you have...use personal/compelling stories & facts – for example, “our school’s **Valedictorian** was rejected at xxxxxx University because her portfolio of advance placement courses was not competitive with other applicants”...real, personal examples like this give the human dimension to what’s happening, what’s at stake
- Tell your legislator specifically what you expect them to do and phrase it a way that asks them for a “yes” or “no” answer...Ask a second time if you do not get a direct answer – For example, “will you vote against a state budget that does not provide an equitable share of aid to our school district?”

This type of open discussion will likely lead to a back and forth dialogue with your legislator. Here are some common questions/statements you are likely to hear with some thoughts on how to respond:

Your legislator says... “That’s a non-starter.”

Based on the critical issues we are dealing with it’s unacceptable for you to say that anything we offer is a non-starter. We expect you to support our needs. It may be difficult but we expect you to represent the interests of your own constituents – nothing less!

If the Legislature and the Governor do nothing we will continue to be seriously hurt. The only acceptable remedy for our problems is that you do something that creates and maintains state aid equity. It’s all about results; isn’t that the rhetoric the Governor and Legislature use in determining the performance of our schools? If what you have provided us to date is your best result, obviously you are not successfully representing our wishes in Albany.

Your legislator says... “This is divisive.”

Current education policies, regulations and laws are strangling our school districts. We have the right and obligation to point them out to you. We have done so continuously yet you have not achieved anything of substance in response to our requests for the systemic, long-term and sustainable relief we need.

You are cooperating in the continuation of gross unfairness...one that jeopardizes the needs of our students, our schools and our community. Your lack of leadership in fighting for change with your house’s leadership has been an instrumental part of bringing our district to the brink of educational and financial insolvency.

Your legislator says... “The SSFC is Anti-Long Island and has become divisive by framing school aid into an Upstate vs. Downstate issue.”

This is total nonsense. The issue we’ve promoted – since 1991 – is the FAIR distribution of state aid. Clearly, all of the data points to many Long Island districts as major benefactors of the distribution of state aid and favorable cuts to state aid compared to other poorer districts that are largely upstate. However, SSFC has always taken care to point out that almost three dozen districts in Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk counties share similar or identical data with their poorer upstate counterparts. We have also suggested that these districts would equally benefit from the changes we suggest.

Since SSFC’s creation in 1991 our fundamental message has been and continues to be that equitable state financial support for school districts must exist for every student regardless of where they live or where they go to school.

Your legislator says... “This is class warfare.”

This is a common response elected officials always seem to use to diminish those of us with real needs. From our point of view – it’s only class warfare if the poor and neglected fight back.

Warren Buffet has a great answer to this knee-jerk response spouted by elected officials who don’t like confrontation on issues of fairness – “There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.”

Your legislator says... “Do you want me to create more mandates to fix what you have done?”

Create some and eliminate some. The fact is that many current mandates are a hindrance to efficiency, productivity and effectiveness- educationally and financially. Further, some things should be mandated to increase productivity, efficiency, and improve student performance.

Your legislator says... “I can’t do that I represent everyone.”

First and foremost you are supposed to represent your constituents’ interests as well as your other constituents. Participating in the continuation of an unfair school aid system that is hurting us means that you are not putting us first.

Your legislator says... “I have your best interests at heart.”

What legislation have you sponsored or helped pass as evidence? What legislation have you opposed that seriously disadvantaged the school districts you represent – even if it meant going against the wishes of your (Senate, Assembly) Leadership?

Your legislator says... “Give me some language and I’ll sponsor a bill.”

For years we and SSFC have discussed with you and outlined in written communications the reforms needed to make to the Foundation Formula and the Gap Elimination Adjustment calculations more equitable. We have also provided in-depth data to back up our concerns – and yet the inequities have continued to exist on your watch.

The Senate and Assembly have large staffs solely dedicated to writing legislation that you and your colleagues request. My suggestion is that you and they get to work on the concerns we have defined for you.

Your legislator says... “You just can’t throw money at it, we are out of money.”

We have never said that. We said change the aid formula to make it more equitable, transparent and predictable. Then change the distribution of aid and distribution of budget cuts FAIRLY. By the way, do you know how much our district’s state aid was cut last year? If not, why not?

Your legislator says... “You can make data say anything.”

Like when the Legislature says that our Expense Driven Aid increases must be subtracted from our Foundation Aid cuts so the cuts look LIKE less than what they actually are? Or when the Governor says we graduate only 40% of our students in four years? That we have widespread waste and abuse? That’s not what’s going on in our districts – AND YOU EITHER KNOW IT OR SHOULD KNOW IT!

The truth and accuracy of our data and assertions has been corroborated by a recent Rutgers University study, as well as recent examinations by researchers at Cornell and Syracuse Universities.

You dislike our data because it is accurate and it reflects the neglect of low wealth/high needs districts by state government. You are our representative – you need to deliver the results we rightfully expect.

Your Senator says... “There is nothing I can do. Long Island has a lock on the legislation.”

Senator, there is absolutely something you can do. There are 19 Republican and 3 Democratic Senators that represent SSFC member districts. With a tight majority in your House, only ONE Republican Senator’s vote is usually needed to halt legislation that disadvantages us.

You can also help us as a bloc of Senators who represent our school districts – DEMAND the reexamination of the current Foundation Aid formula, the FAIR distribution of that formula as well as any cuts in state aid...and REFUSE TO VOTE IN FAVOR OF A STATE BUDGET THAT DOES NOT BRING EQUITY TO THE SCHOOL AID PROCESS.

Your legislator says... “Thank you, we’ll be in touch.”

We’re glad to hear it. We will have a member of our team call your office each week so that you can update us on your progress. We can then clarify our expectations for you and provide you with any data that would support your efforts.

We really expect progress on every front as we face the demise of our educational program and with it the loss of a productive future for our children; the economic viability of our community and the further erosion of our tax base. Let’s set up the next few meeting, I have some parents and business leaders that would like to talk with you....