



NSBA 2020 Advocacy Institute: Champion Our Children *Homework for Congressional Meetings - Tuesday, February 4, 2020*

In preparation for visits with your state Congressional delegation during the National School Boards Association (NSBA) 2020 Advocacy Institute, we have prepared some information and questions to help prepare you in advance of those meetings. The Capitol Hill visits will occur on Tuesday, February 4, 2020. Preparation is especially important this year since Congressional Offices and the Capitol will be preparing for the State of the Union Address which takes place that evening. This briefing contains information on some of the main issues that will be addressed at this year's Advocacy Institute and key questions to answer in preparation for the Congressional visits. While the questions and answers are primarily for your benefit, NSBA encourages you to email your answers to the questions prior to the Advocacy Institute so we can maintain a master list of some of the most pressing issues facing school board members. You may email your answers to NSBA staff member Alesha Stuart at astuart@nsba.org or bring them with you to Washington and provide them when you register for the event.

Additionally, NSBA encourages all of you to participate in a webinar targeted toward Advocacy Institute participants. NSBA has partnered with the Congressional Management Foundation to offer a pre-conference webinar for those planning to attend the Advocacy Institute. The webinar will be held on January 29, 2020, at 3:00 pm (eastern) and will cover the fundamentals of successful meetings with Members of Congress. You can sign up for the webinar at the [NSBA Webinar Registration](#) link. Additional announcements will go out in coming days publicizing this special webinar.

Overview

This year's Advocacy Institute is particularly important as the futures of more than fifty million students who attend public schools are at stake as Congress resumes in January and we get closer to a national election. The holiday season brought good news for public education with passage of a bipartisan agreement to fund the government for Fiscal Year 2020 with a \$1.3 billion increase for education, including a \$450 million increase for ESSA Title I, which supports schools with large numbers of low-income families, and a \$410 million increase for the IDEA State Grants program that will assist students with disabilities. Passage of this measure is a good step forward for the nine out of ten students across the nation who attend public schools. However, while a positive step, there is still much to be accomplished to truly transform learning in America and ensure success for every student and the nation. As the national election looms, there are countless issues of concern for school boards including recruiting, retaining, and securing great teachers; fighting for full funding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); creating a healthy and safe school environment; bridging the digital divide in learning; and fighting for public education investments to better prepare students with twenty-first century life skills. Further, other issues promoting educational equity and policies that enhance the well-being of all students—such as fighting for important school nutrition programs, advocating to restore the pathway to U.S. citizenship for qualified undocumented students previously protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and working for an accurate Census—are among many priorities for NSBA during the next year. The following five areas are recommended for focus for this year's efforts due to the national scope of each issue.

Recruiting, Retaining, and Securing Great Teachers

School board members across the nation recognize that their teachers remain the backbone of successful public education. A great teacher can bring out the best in a student and make a significant positive difference in their lives. However, there is a crisis in education due to a lack of certified teachers and it impacts schools and students across the nation. The number of teachers reaching retirement age is growing but that is only part of the problem, the issue goes deeper than just teacher retirements. Many great teachers are changing their careers and leaving the classroom early and there is a lack of others entering the teaching profession which is adding to the crisis. There are several reasons for this problem. Teacher wages remain stagnant in many areas, professional development and mentoring for teachers is lacking, and teachers are dealing with many issues beyond simply educating their students such as social and mental health issues. As school board members know, attracting great teachers is a major challenge for school districts. The need is especially challenging in high-need subjects, in special education, for students of color, and in rural areas. Recognizing this teaching shortage, NSBA is advocating that the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) must do more to strengthen educator preparation and encourage high-performing students to become teachers and has been aggressively working in a leadership coalition with other key education associations.

Part of the effort to get more teachers includes NSBA's support for inclusion of the bipartisan Preparing and Retaining Education Professionals (PREP) Act in the HEA rewrite. U.S. Senators Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Susan Collins (R-ME), both members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee, introduced the legislation to address teacher and principal shortages, especially in rural communities; and, to ensure that those educators have the right skills to be effective. The PREP Act seeks to strengthen Title II and reduce educator shortages by providing incentives to attract high-performing students to the educator profession, which would help ensure educator preparation programs deliver more sophisticated training in high-need subject areas, including special education. The PREP Act would also promote partnerships with school districts to provide targeted professional development and other supports to help teachers in high-need subject areas succeed in what can be unique and challenging positions. NSBA is a leader in the effort to support the PREP Act and has been working collaboratively with other partner organizations to meet with key Senators and their staffs to seek support of the legislation.

It's Time for a Great IDEA – Full Funding for Students with Disabilities

Providing students with disabilities an excellent education is not only a legal requirement under IDEA, it is the right and moral thing to do. Public schools across the nation are committed to providing those students opportunities to learn and succeed every day. While local districts are providing this valuable service, the federal government is not living up to its responsibility to those students by not providing adequate and full funding to help local schools with the efforts. This failure not only hurts the 6.9 million students with disabilities, it hurts all the students who attend public schools—more than fifty million of them. If full funding for IDEA were provided by Congress, the possibilities to improve public education would be vast. Schools across the nation could increase resources for students with disabilities and expand opportunities to provide other services that improve public education for all students such as providing teachers with more robust professional learning, increasing access to high-speed broadband and adaptive technology important for personalized learning—which is also a vital instruction innovation for

students with disabilities, and increasing other important student supports. This is a momentous time for Congress to pass meaningful legislation that has wide-spread bipartisan support. Full funding for IDEA would be a major positive development in improving the lives of millions of students.

Creating a Safe and Healthy School Climate and Environment

NSBA is committed to providing a safe school environment that supports the well-being of every child including emergency preparedness and response training; interagency coordination; assisting local school districts' efforts to address mental health, safety, and social needs; trauma informed instruction; and, disclosure of certain student data to help prevent and/or mitigate school violence. Part of the specific focus includes providing adequate school infrastructure designed to safeguard against attacks and potential threats and having mental health programs in place to help the mental and social and emotional well-being essential to achieve positive outcomes for students in their academic, professional, and personal lives. Moreover, important safeguards for protecting digital infrastructure and student data from cyber-attacks is becoming more crucial. The rapid pace of technological change is leading to schools facing new challenges in identifying threats, protecting personal information, and promoting the positive and responsible use of technology by staff and students. NSBA assists school board members and districts through the Center for Safe Schools which provides resources, information, and best practices on various issues related to a safe and health school climate and environment.

Recent NSBA efforts include testimony before the Federal Commission on School Safety and Florida's blue-ribbon commission on school safety, specifically addressing student discipline and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Through those efforts, NSBA advanced important recommendations calling for local control of school safety issues by letting local school districts customize approaches that best fit their communities, provide more support for school resource officers, and improve school-based mental health and counseling. NSBA also supports H.R. 3539, the Behavioral Interventions Guidelines Act of 2019, which is legislation sponsored by U.S. Representative Drew Ferguson (R-GA) which amends "the Public Health Service Act to direct the Secretary of Health and Human Services to develop best practices for the establishment and use of behavioral intervention teams at schools, and for other purposes." Additionally, NSBA has conveyed support for H.R. 865, the Rebuild America's Schools Act, except for one provision that would expand existing federal law governing labor standards requirements and make them applicable to school bond programs. With the exception of the labor-related provisions, the Rebuild America's Schools Act would address many priorities for safe and healthy learning environments that facilitate interactive classroom instruction, build capacity for experiential learning and skills development, engage our students and communities as cornerstones for civic participation, and promote efficiencies within school district operating budgets.¹

Bridging the Digital Divide in Learning

Providing students with modern instruction practices such as personalized learning is vital if we want to prepare students for success in a world that is increasingly technology and information driven. More than fifty million students attend public schools across the nation, representing most students in K-12

¹ NSBA supports this measure, but opposes the inclusion of provisions that would impede local governance and authority regarding labor requirements and urges the Congress to uphold the right of school boards to pursue the most efficient and cost-effective means of delivering education and related services, including contracts with outside providers.

education. As public schools explore ways to improve and modernize instruction for their students through methods such as personalized learning, the need for access to technology such as adaptive software and high-speed broadband is imperative. While schools have seen vast improvements in broadband connectivity thanks to programs such as the Schools and Libraries Program, a program run by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) which gives all schools and libraries a discount to connect to the internet, there is still room for improvement to better help schools with technology issues. Moreover, while many students are connected in school, many others lack connectivity when they are out of school creating a “homework gap” that leads to an unequal learning situation for many students based on income and where they live. Some school districts with high numbers of students who lack adequate Internet access are trying to deal with this problem by equipping school buses with Wi-Fi and parking them in neighborhoods with connectivity issues to provide local “hotspots” so students can access the internet to do their homework. The issue is particularly concerning for minority students and students that live in very rural areas. But the problem persists throughout the entire nation.

Focused on the issue of broadband connectivity and access, NSBA is aggressively fighting a proposed rule by the FCC that could impact the progress made in better connecting schools and libraries to the Internet. The proposed rule would place a cap on the Universal Service Fund (USF), which includes the E-Rate Program, and would additionally place a sub-cap on E-Rate and Rural Health Care Programs forcing programs to potentially compete for funding. NSBA worked collaboratively with the states to send a sign-on letter to the FCC concerning the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) to oppose the rule that would lead to burdensome competition among other broadband access programs and violates the intent of Congress to provide universal access to connectivity. Enactment of the rule would also create uncertainty for school boards and districts across the nation when engaging in their yearly budgeting process. The letter to the FCC called for a rejection of the rule and a request to focus on closing the digital divide in education. “Instead, we respectfully request that the Commission join with the nation’s school board members to focus on expanding access to high-speed broadband, so students have enhanced access in and out of school.” All 49 member states and NSBA signed on to the letter and at least eight states and NSBA submitted their own individual comments. Legislation was passed unanimously by the U.S. House of Representatives to prevent the FCC from implementing the rule and there is bipartisan support in the U.S. Senate calling on the FCC abandon the effort. NSBA is urging the FCC and Congress to focus on ways to improve the overall connectivity of all students and abandon efforts to make connectivity more difficult.

Public Education Investments: Developing 21st Century Life Skills for Students

Great public education is the best way for the nation and students to succeed in an increasingly competitive world. In schools across the nation, there are examples of efforts being made in schools to modernize and improve learning for students, which includes choice within public education through instruction innovation such as personalized learning. There are many success stories that come out of those efforts. Taking those stories and growing them across our schools is paramount to move the needle forward in student learning. But moving to those options requires adequate resources to implement.

Proposals by U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and others that encourage disinvestment in the success of our local public-school districts and communities hurt the 90 percent of students across the nation who attend public schools. These proposals are also contrary to the intent of Congress in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and are bad policy. The fundamental reality is that most public school

districts already offer students a wide range of choices within their school district, with concentrations in specific areas such as the arts or STEM subject areas, advanced placement courses, magnet schools, charter schools authorized by local school boards, personalized learning, and other public specialty schools. Increased investments in teachers, IDEA, and access to high-speed broadband are just a few of the ways to increase innovation and improvement across public schools.

Questions to Consider for Congressional Visits:

- 1) **Issue:** Teacher recruitment and retention remains a major problem in public education across the nation. Many great teachers are changing their careers and leaving the classroom early, and the pipeline of teachers is not adequate to meet future needs. There are several reasons for this problem. Teacher wages remain stagnant in many regions of the country, professional development and mentoring for teachers is lacking, and teachers are dealing with many health and social issues beyond simply educating their students. These shortages are especially challenging in high-need subjects, in special education, and in rural areas.

Questions: Is your district having difficulty filling open teacher positions? If so, how many current openings do you have and how many new positions did your district need to fill going into the 2019-20 school year? Are you deficient in qualified teachers in certain areas such as special education or STEM? Is your district satisfied with the skill level of incoming new teachers? Do teachers in your district have access to robust professional development, mentoring, and collaboration opportunities? What type of new resources would help you recruit and retain more teachers?

- 2) **Issue:** Local school districts are bearing the major costs to educate students with disabilities under IDEA. Unfortunately, the federal government has not lived up to its promise to help local school districts and adequately assist students with disabilities receive an excellent education. This lack of promised federal support impacts school districts and all their students in a variety of ways. The infusion of an increased federal financial commitment for IDEA from Congress would enable districts to provide more services to students with disabilities and provide additional resources district wide.

Questions: If Congress began funding IDEA at increased levels, what types of activities would you prioritize with the eased financial burden? What type of additional staff and personnel would assist your school district to help augment assistance for students with disabilities if Congress appropriated the whole federal share of resources promised for IDEA (such as additional therapists, speech pathologists, and paraprofessionals)? What would be the overall impact to students with disabilities in your school district if additional resources were provided through IDEA? What about the overall impact to all students? Do your elected representatives understand what special resources it takes to educate a student with disabilities including costs and special resources? Have you had them visit a special education classroom to see how IDEA impacts students?

- 3) **Issue:** School districts are struggling to make their schools and learning environments safer. Some of the most pressing issues include concern over increased violence in schools such as school shootings, shortages of adequate mental health supports and counselors, older schools with

lingering environmental problems that could lead to health issues, lack of adequate infrastructure sufficiently hardened to protect students and staff during major incidents, and cybersecurity issues related to data and privacy.

Questions: What are the biggest safety issues impacting students in your district? What kind of federal support would be most effective in addressing your district's infrastructure needs (such as grants, special municipal/school bond programs that would help lower finance costs for school construction, and greater resources for school safety and disaster preparedness)? What are your mental health needs for your students, teachers, and other staff? Do your schools have enough trained counselors? What are the most pressing issues related to school infrastructure to make a healthier and safer environment? Do your school buildings contain adequate safeguards for major incidents including the ability to lock down the building and communicate internally? Does your district have any cybersecurity or privacy issues? Do you have adequate technology and policies to protect student and district data and prevent cybersecurity issues and data breaches?

- 4) **Issue:** As public schools explore ways to improve and modernize instruction for their students through methods such as personalized learning, the need for access to technology such as adaptive software and high-speed broadband is imperative. While schools have seen vast improvements in broadband connectivity thanks to programs such as the Schools and Libraries Program, commonly called E-Rate, that is run by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which give all schools and libraries a discount to connect to the internet, there is still room for improvement to better help schools with technology issues. Moreover, while many students are connected in school, many others lack connectivity when they are out of school creating a "homework gap" that produces an inequitable learning situation among students attending the same school. While the problem is nationwide, lack of adequate connectivity for minority students and students living in remote rural areas is particularly high.

Questions: How important is high-speed broadband and technology for adequate student learning in your district? What impact has the expansion and modernization of the E-Rate program had in better connecting your schools to the Internet since the program was expanded in 2015 to accommodate more high-speed broadband? What are the current digital infrastructure improvements your schools need that they still lack? What discount rating do the schools in your district receive through the E-Rate program? What would be the impact if E-Rate funding became uncertain or limited? Are all your schools at the same level of connectivity or are there some schools that lack adequate access compared to other district schools? Are your buses equipped for Wi-Fi that students can use when traveling to and from school or when on school trips? Do all your students have adequate access to digital tools and high-speed broadband when they are not in school or is there a persistent "homework gap" that exists among your students? Are there pockets of communities in your district where broadband is limited and increased digital infrastructure is necessary?

- 5) **Issue:** Private education advocates argue it is necessary to divert taxpayer funds away from local public schools and divert them to provide vouchers for private education and for-profit charter schools. One of the false reasons for this diversion cited by proponents of privatization is that local public schools are limited in their learning options for students including offering innovative instruction. The reality is that there is much student-centered innovation occurring in public

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schools including personalized learning, project-based learning, special career and technical education, dual enrollment, magnet and charter schools authorized by local school boards, and other programs designed to prepare students for success in the modern world. However, diversion of public school funding for private education harms those efforts while increased funding and resources could greatly increase that innovation and expand opportunities for the more than fifty million students attending public schools to learn in new ways and be prepared for future success.

Questions: What types of innovative learning, resources, and strategies are taking place in your district schools to better prepare students with twenty-first century and life skills? What are the biggest issues impacting implementation of innovation such as personalized learning? Is your district equipped with adequate technology and broadband access for students both within and out of school necessary for modern instruction? Are there policies or federal laws that make implementation difficult? If your district has vouchers or charter schools not authorized by your school board, does the redirection of taxpayer money to them impact your ability to have more innovation and if so, how? How important is it to parents in your community that their child's individual needs are being met and their learning is personalized based on those needs?

While these issues and questions are voluntary, NSBA encourages each participant to answer these questions so you are fully prepared to meet with your Congressional Delegation. NSBA will be collecting answers for those of you willing to provide them. You can email them to Alesha Stuart at astuart@nsba.org or bring them with you to the Advocacy Institute.

We look forward to seeing you in February.