

## **Tips and Techniques for Speaking before a School Board**

After making public statements before several school board meetings, WE CAN developed some best practices. We don't follow every step, every time, but these are good things to consider when we plan to speak at a school board meeting.

**Recruit a crowd.** We believe that our statements have a bigger impact because we have a half dozen or more, sometimes many more, supporters.

**Recruit a speaker.** School boards want, most, to hear from people in their district — parents, students, or citizens. We've made particularly good impressions with young alums. School boards love seeing the return of their successful students. Alumni make good spokespeople whether or not they currently live in the district.

**Meet with individual school board members before the meeting.** Elected officials are generally happy to meet with their constituents. Stories that are too private to share in a public setting can be told to individual school board members, that can include criticism of particular staff members (personal criticism is generally disallowed, by policy, from public statements at board meetings)

**Alert the media.** This one requires a bit of finesse. An extra print or radio reporter can make an impression. TV cameras can make a school board feel attacked. Sometimes that's appropriate, but sometimes we want to be more gentle in our approach.

**Write your statement.** In our region, many school districts limit each comment to three minutes — some school boards even have a timer. Practice reading the statement aloud to make sure that it ends strongly in less than three minutes. If there are many statements, some school boards will implement a 90-second rule, so be prepared to cut out about half at the last minute or arrive with a 3-minute version and a 90-second version.

**Print several copies of your statement** and include your contact information. Leave a copy with the school board secretary so that the board or superintendent can respond. There's usually a reporter for the local newspaper who will take a copy, too.

**Wear clothes that make you feel comfortable and confident.** St. Louis tends to be pretty casual, and that applies to school board meetings. We usually aim for something in the range between business-casual and professional

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**Arrive 30 minutes before the start of the meeting** to sign in to make a public comment. Every school district we've been to has some kind of sign-in procedure to make a public comment, either a card or a list. I've heard that they will limit the comment period and only allow a limited number of comments. To be sure that we're on the list, we always plan to be first.

**Post a photo of the speaker** reading his or her statement on Facebook, tagging everyone you know in the room. We get a lot of attention for our efforts from that type of post.

**Tweet lines from the statement** as it is being read, tagging the school district. The person making tweets will want a print copy of the statement and might want to type some tweets in advance

**.Be prepared to get no immediate response** from the school board at all. Boards work slowly and fear making any commitment in the moment. Occasionally, we've had questions, most of which required simply re-reading the section of the statement that the questioner didn't quite hear.

**Stay for the whole meeting.** Some of your crowd can leave after the public comment period, having already made an impact. You'll want at least a few people to stick around for the whole meeting. It's at the end of the meeting that you'll find out who your allies are — those are the folks who will come talk to you after the meeting. Our willingness to sit through the meeting makes a positive impression on board members.