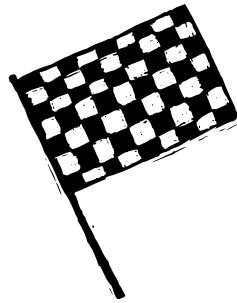


SECTION VI: Reaching the Final Destination



This section provides information on the political process that you might find yourself caught in. It also explains what advocacy is and provides a checklist of actions you can take to advocate on behalf of yourself and other students in your school.

Contents:

- **The Long and Winding Road: Schools & Politics.** An explanation of the school political system.
- **Greasing the Wheel: Tips for Working with Your School Board**
- **Checkpoints: Advocacy Action List.** A step-by-step plan for advocating for better sex ed.

The Long & Winding Road: Schools & Politics

To be a successful advocate, you have to understand how school boards, superintendents and the public influence each other.

In most states, the school board is charged with overseeing the way your school is run. The school board works for the taxpayers in your town — the people who pay for your schools. These voters have the power to elect school board members — or vote them out of office. So, in general, board members pay attention to what voters say. That's why it is so important to get community support for your cause. (A few towns appoint their school board, but they are still accountable to the public.)

Superintendents work for the school board. They oversee the daily operation of your schools. They are the education experts that the board depends on for guidance on issues. That means their opinions really matter. But, in the end, school boards must approve all policy, personnel and spending decisions.

Politics can get complicated. Board members often have different reasons for supporting — or not supporting — a specific proposal. They are often concerned about cost and public perception. It's your job to convince them that your proposal is good for both students and the community.

Greasing the Wheel: Tips for Working with Your School Board

- 1. Who Are They?** You need to know the views of each board member. What do they think are the most pressing issues facing our schools? What parts of the curriculum are they most concerned about? What do they think about sexuality education? You can get at these issues in a number of ways. The best way is to call or write to each board member. Ask them for an individual meeting. Then, discuss their views and ideas and present a few of your own.
- 2. Follow Up.** After your meeting, send the board member a packet of information on sexuality education. You can use materials in this guide or other information you find on your own. Tell them again why you think good sexuality education is so important to students and parents.
- 3. Attend School Board Meetings.** Start going to meetings so they see you're interested and they get to know who you are. Maybe you can rotate the meeting responsibility among several group members.
- 4. Offer to Help.** In some communities, students are represented on the school board. If your board doesn't do this, ask if you could become the student representative. Also, boards might like the idea of a "student consultant" — someone who can give them an inside view on what goes on in high school.
- 5. Lobby.** Ask community leaders, parents, religious leaders and others who support your cause to call, write, fax or e-mail school board members. You'd be surprised what a few letters can do.
- 6. Position Your Arguments.** When you're talking to board members, remember what concerns them most and make sure your arguments address those issues. So, if a school board member is really worried about taking time away from the three Rs to give students more time in sex ed classes, you could stress how sexuality issues often make it more difficult for students

to learn (i.e., pregnant girls who drop out of school).

- 7. Speak Up.** Attend any meeting when board members are scheduled to talk about sexuality issues. Stand up and be heard.
- 8. Be Consistent.** You need to get a message and stick to it. Say it over and over again to school board members. Repetition is key.
- 9. Support Candidates.** When elections roll around, find the candidates who support good sex ed. Even though you can't vote, you can help them get elected.
- 10. Get Your Parents to Vote.** Make sure they weigh in at the ballot box in school elections. Too few people vote in school elections, so it only takes one vote to make a difference. When you have school board members who support sexuality education, your job just got tons easier.



Checkpoints: Advocacy Action List

Here are some action steps you can take. You probably won't be able to do all of these steps in one year. But start with the first and work your way through the list.

- ✓ **Be Informed.** Read the info in this guide and as much other stuff as you can find.
- ✓ **Know Your Community.** Analyze the information you received from the student survey, the community forum and the parent survey so you have an accurate picture of what students, parents and teachers think about sexuality education. If possible, make charts or graphs that show the results of your research in a way that would persuade people you have community support.
- ✓ **Show Support.** Prepare a list of community organizations that support your cause.
- ✓ **Know Your Current Sexuality Education Program.**
- ✓ **Prepare a Proposal or Resolution.**
- ✓ **Get on the Agenda.** You're going to need to lobby several boards, including the school board subcommittee that oversees sexuality education (many communities have one), the parent-teachers association, the school board. You'll need to call the board chairman or president and ask to be placed on the agenda of its next meeting. At each meeting, you should present your research, petitions and recommendations. Bring along a few students to tell board members why sexuality education is crucial for teens. Ask supportive parents, community leaders and other adults to also attend the meetings to voice support. Present your resolution on sexuality education. Ask the boards to pass the resolution and ask for their support and their advice in making real changes in your school.
- ✓ **Lobby.** This means talking to board members separately. You can call them and ask for their support. It's also crucial to attend school board meetings so they get to know you and realize that you are truly interested in what's happening in your school district. This will help you gain their respect. It will help you find out where each member stands and whether you can count on their vote. (More on this under "Tips for Working with Your School Board.")
- ✓ **Alert the Media.** At some point during this process, you should let newspapers, radio and TV stations know what's going on. (More about this in the "Tips for Working with the Media" section.)
- ✓ **Be Patient and Persistent.** Change takes a lot of time (sometimes years) and hard work. Don't give up. If they put you off at one meeting, just show up at the next one. They can't ignore you forever when you show them you aren't going away.
- ✓ **Be Happy with Small Victories.** Change happens one small step at a time. If you've gotten a resolution passed, you've done something.
- ✓ **Pass It On.** When you graduate, give this guide to another group of students who are brave enough to ride the road to better sex ed. They can start a new project, or make sure that the policies you helped pass actually get implemented.

