

3 Steps to Build and Maintain Relationships with Elected Officials

**Based on the February 2017 CEC CAN DO! Newsletter*

To impact and advance special and gifted education and early intervention policy it is important to understand the legislative process and establish relationships with your elected officials and their staff! Developing relationships with policymakers will yield positive outcomes in your advocacy and networking efforts.

Here are three (3) steps you can take to establish and build your relationships with elected officials and their staff!

[Find out who your elected officials are through CEC's Legislative Action Center!](#)

1. Questions to Consider

When thinking of ways to approach and relate to your elected officials, it is important to know some basic facts about them. Some questions to consider include:

- Does your member of Congress have a personal connection to special/gifted education/early intervention?
- What is the professional background of your member of Congress?
- What kind of constituency does your elected official represent - rural, urban, or suburban?
- What committees are they members of? Who/what influences them? What issues are their focus areas - labor, business, etc.?
- What legislation has your member of Congress introduced or co-sponsored?

2. Establishing Relationships

Access: Introduce yourself to your elected officials and their staff via email, phone call, or an in-person visit! Share information about yourself: what you do, why you're there, and resources that you can provide them. Make an effort to attend Town Hall Meetings, schedule an in-person meeting at your member of Congress' local district office, and invite your member of Congress to visit your program/school!

Support: You may not always agree with the policies supported by your elected officials, but look for areas of common ground and there may be some issues to work on together! If they are new to their role, welcome an opportunity to collaborate in the future.

Clarify: Talk with your official about what relevant policy issues impact children and youth with exceptionalities and the professionals who work on their behalf. Discuss why

your issue is important and how they can potentially assist you. Use DEC's Policy Council Chair or the [DEC CAN Coordinator](#) as a resource to help you identify timely early childhood special education and early intervention policy issues.

Become a Resource: Elected officials want to represent their constituents in the most effective way possible. Come prepared with information they might find useful pertaining to their constituency, in order to provide background on a certain issue. Provide solid facts and figures and remember they are looking to **you** to educate them on these specific issues. Show your member of Congress how you can help in communicating information to their constituency.

Be Clear and Honest: Do not be afraid to ask your member of Congress for support, as long as it is an appropriate request. Tell them exactly what kind of action you would like to see from them. If they ask you a question you do not know the answer to, don't be afraid to say that you will follow up with them (contact the DEC Policy Council Chair or the [DEC CAN Coordinator](#) and we can help!)

3. Maintaining Relationships

After meeting and building a relationship with your elected official, there is the challenge of maintaining that relationship:

- Invite your elected official to one of your own events or an event that might be important for your member of Congress to know about concerning a pressing policy issue.
- Follow up with your member of Congress. Keep them updated on what you're working on and any other useful updates they should know about.
- When they have been openly supportive, thank them quickly and publicly for their support. Publicize their support by submitting a Letter to the Editor to your local newspaper.
- Provide regular communication, remind them that you're here and interested in maintaining a relationship.

Building and maintaining relationships is a two-way street! When you serve as a resource for your member of Congress, they are more likely to be a resource for your advocacy activities!