



ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

General Brown Central School District



Your voice can make a difference...

**Be an advocate
for students in the General
Brown Central School District**

www.gblions.org



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General Brown - like school districts throughout New York – need to be creative in balancing their budget. The slow recovery of the national economy, coupled with the State budget deficit and the state’s tax levy limit, challenges public schools to continue to provide a high-quality education to all students with significantly few resources.

District leaders at General Brown have been working with staff and community members to find creative ways to balance the budget without sacrificing the integrity of our program. Yet without consistent increases in State aid from our government leaders, General Brown residents may risk losing the high level of public education that they have come to know and value throughout the years.

The time for change is now. The voices of school leaders and lobbyists for state-level education groups simply are not enough, as recent legislative sessions have shown. Elected officials need to hear from you, their constituents. They need to hear from the people that are most directly impacted by their decisions (or indecisions) year after year – the students, parents, employees, residents, community groups and business owners of General Brown.

But what can I do?

Advocacy takes many forms. It could be a note to an elected official, a comment made during a public forum, a letter to a newspaper editor or formal testimony at public hearings. It could be as simple as chatting with neighbors to clear up misunderstandings about education issues or sharing education-related stories with a local civic organization during monthly meetings.

Becoming an advocate for education is not as hard as you might think. Anyone can become involved, at any level they choose. The only prerequisite necessary is a desire to fight for our students and our community schools.

Effective advocates do their homework. They know the issues and plan their communication. Most of all, they give their time to advance their cause.

In this packet, you will find several tools to help you become an advocate for education and for GBCSD. Thank you for taking the time to advocate on behalf of the children of General Brown and for helping to ensure that they receive the high-quality education they deserve.



Advocacy Checklist

Concerned citizens often wonder what they can do to help their local students and schools. *The answer:* Complete one or more of the items on the advocacy checklist below. Then encourage your friends and neighbors to do the same.

Empower Yourself

- Choose an issue affecting General Brown and learn about that issue (Action Step #1 – see page 3)
- Hone and deliver a “laser talk” to someone about the issue you choose (Action Step #2 – see page 4)

Advocate with your legislators

- Send a letter or email to local legislators (Action Step #3 – see page 4)
- Establish a relationship with legislators’ aides (Action Step #4 – see page 4)
- Schedule face-to-face meetings with legislators and ask them to take a leadership role on your selected issue (Action Step #5 – see page 4)
- Invite legislators to special events at schools
- Ask questions at legislators’ town hall meetings

Advocate through the media

- Write a letter to a newspaper editor and send your published letter to local legislators
- Copy editorials or newspaper articles about your issue and send them to local legislators

Advocate in the community

- Organize a letter-writing campaign
- Speak to a local community group
- Use social media to spread the word about what you are advocating for

How can I have a good discussion with a legislator?

Follow these tips to engage in productive, back-and-forth discussions with legislators, even when you don’t agree on the issues.

- **Be brief.** Stick to your key points. Legislators will appreciate your respect for their busy schedules.
- **Be respectful, but also confident and direct.** A thoughtful discussion gives both sides an opportunity to come to an agreement, while a divisive argument makes both sides want to win. So keep it civil while standing up for your beliefs.
- **Be clear and specific.** Let legislators know exactly what you want them to do (e.g. vote in favor of a bill, sponsor legislation) in a way that requires them to give you a “yes” or “no” response.
- **Be accurate.** Research your issue so you can answer legislators’ questions. Promise to follow up on any question for which you don’t immediately have an answer.
- **Be honest about your concerns.** Paint the real picture of your situation, even if it is scary. Share the ramifications for your community’s schools and children. Use personal or compelling stories and facts.
- **Be timely and persistent.** If an issue has a deadline, make sure you give legislators enough time to respond to the issue. Regular reminders about the importance of the issue from multiple advocates can increase the likelihood that legislators will pay attention to the issue.



How can I be an advocate for my local school?

Action Step #1

Learn about the issues affecting your schools.

- **Unfair distribution of state aid**

After a court order in 2003, New York adopted a new school finance formula that was meant to adjust for need and cost in each district. The Foundation Aid formula was supposed to ensure a fairer, more predictable distribution of aid, but it has yet to be fully implemented.

The current state aid distribution system appears to distribute funds at least partly based on the philosophy of making sure every school district gets a share. In practice, this means well-funded districts in wealthier communities receive a level of state aid (allowing for expanded programs and services) that is disproportionate in terms of need when compared to less funded districts that would benefit more from the aid. Furthermore, General Brown is negatively impacted by the property wealth factor used in state aid distribution.

In September 2012, a report on school funding by the Center for American Progress found that New York has a “regressive” state aid distribution system where inequity in funding persists.

Solution: State aid should be distributed based on the actual cost of providing a sound, basic education for every student in a way that fairly compensates for differences in community costs, needs and resources. This would allow school districts to provide equal educational opportunities for all students.

- **Aid lost to Gap Elimination Adjustment**

The Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) was introduced in 2010 as a way for the state

overall Foundation Aid due to schools. New York schools have lost more than \$9 billion in promised school aid (General Brown has lost more than 7.8 million dollars).

Under the property tax levy limit or “cap,” less funded districts are less able than wealthier districts to compensate for this loss of state aid by raising local revenue through school taxes.

Solution: Eliminating the property wealth factor in the State aid formula.

- **Lack of substantial mandate relief**

The state and federal governments and the Board of Regents regularly create laws and regulations – known as mandates – that provide schools with guidance on daily operations. Schools in New York are subject to several hundred mandates, and districts that don’t adhere to them can lose money through lawsuits and the withdrawal of other aid funds.

Some estimates suggest that 76 percent of typical school district expenditures are either directly or indirectly related to mandates, many of which are not fully funded. Of the 151 mandates that represent the greatest challenges to school districts in terms of financial burden and required time, 69 percent come with no funding.

(source: www.p12.nysed.gov/fmis/mandaterelief)

For many districts, fulfilling all mandates while staying within the property tax levy limit has meant ongoing reductions in non-mandated programs and services for students as well as the loss of staff positions.

Solution: The best, most viable solution is to ensure that there are no more unfunded or underfunded state mandates.



Action Step #2

Develop a “laser talk.”

Deliver your messages more effectively by telling gripping stories in brief presentations known as “laser talks.”

- **Identify the PROBLEM**

Focus first on identifying a problem you want your listener to know about. Try to connect the problem to an issue the listener already cares about

- **Present a SOLUTION**

Next, inform the listener about a solution to the problem you just presented. Give examples of how the solution would work and why it would be effective.

- **Issue a call to ACTION**

Calls to action should be concrete, specific and include a “yes” or “no” question.

- **Work in a personal story**

Try to include a compelling, personal story that expands on your laser talk.

Action Step #3

Write letters to your legislators.

Legislators often report that their inaction on an issue is simply because not enough people contacted them about it. Writing a letter is a simple way to ensure your legislators know how you want to be represented. When writing a letter:

- *Include the same points that you defined in your laser talk. The letter should include an introduction, problem statement, proposed solution, conclusion and call to action. (A sample letter is attached)*
- *Keep your letter short; a single page is best.*
- *Be concise and specific, but add a personal touch. Handwritten letters get the most attention.*

Action Step #4

Develop a relationship with your legislators’ aides

Sometimes knowing legislators’ aides can be just as valuable as knowing the legislators. Aides often have a great deal of influence on the assembly members and senators for whom they work as well as more time to devote to concerns. Try to build great relationships with these essential staff members.

Action Step #5

Meet face to face with your legislators.

Ideally, your first meeting with a legislator should be before a problem arises. It’s best to schedule a personal meeting in a legislator’s local district office. Keep in mind these additional tips for an effective meeting:

- **Be on time.** Legislators have full schedules and may not be available if you arrive late.
- **Be concise.** Stick to your message and expect no more than 15 minutes for a meeting.
- **Be flexible.** If your legislator is late or can’t attend, convey the same message you had planned to deliver to the legislator’s aide.
- **Be pleasant and appreciative.** Niceness and a bit of humor can make your visit memorable.
- **Be passionate, not emotional.** Emotional pleas often make others uncomfortable.
- **Be prepared.** Make sure you understand the arguments in opposition to your issue and have talking points prepared to combat them. Answer any questions your legislator may have and promise to follow up if you don’t immediately have an answer available. Have some materials that are relevant to your issue to leave behind.
- **Be personal about your issue.** Speak with passion about local children, local jobs, the local economy, local taxes, etc.



How do I contact my elected officials?

NYS Governor Andrew M. Cuomo

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

NYS Assembly member Addie Jennie 118th Assembly District

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NYS Senator Patty Ritchie 48th Senate District

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