



# GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

## is ESSENTIAL in Making the Case for Our Public Schools

*By Terry Spradlin, Executive Director*

**W**ith the 2022 general election behind us, ISBA welcomes 338 new school board members to the Association in 2023. We are gearing up to support these members with the comprehensive and timely programming provided through ISBA's New Board Member Academy that runs through June. This is not the only important work that we are conducting now on behalf of our members. We are actively working to fulfill our commitment to advocate on behalf of Indiana's nearly 1,700 school board members, and K-12 public education broadly, through our legislative services known as our Legislative Action Network. We need the help of all school board members to be successful with this work.

Are you ready to engage today in state-level grassroots advocacy

to help inform, influence, and shape sound K-12 education policy? Are you ready and willing to be a champion of our public schools and to be an advocate for the more than 1 million Hoosier students in our classrooms? Are you familiar with how the Indiana School Boards Association (ISBA) sets its legislative priorities to support model school board governance and promote exemplary educational opportunities for Hoosier students? Why is this work even important?

The first regular session of the 123rd Indiana General Assembly convened on January 9, 2023. This will be a "long session" that is required by law to conclude no later than April 29. This is also a budget session that will result in a new two-year (biennial) state budget that appropriates more than \$18 billion per year on



state programs and services. In the FY 2022 and FY 2023 General Fund appropriations, the proportion spent on K-12 education has been 44.8% of all state expenditures. In FY 2023 that runs through June 30, 2023, more than \$8 billion/year is appropriated to the tuition support formula that funds the Education Fund budgets of school corporations. Policymakers will have significant discussion that will center on how much of an increase to dedicate to K-12 education.

Beyond funding matters, it is anticipated that K-12 education policy will remain a priority issue among the hundreds of bills introduced for consideration. The Indiana School Boards Association (ISBA) is dedicated to improving the quality of education provided to students by public schools throughout the state of Indiana. ISBA recognizes the role of the General Assembly in enacting legislation that impacts public education and is committed to representing the interests of its member school corporations when addressing legislative initiatives. You

have a role to play, too. The ISBA Code of Ethics states that a school board member should honor the high responsibility that membership demands by “recognizing responsibility as a State official to seek the improvement of education throughout the State.” This statement supports the role school board members have to communicate with state policymakers on issues impacting public education.

If you were among the approximately 1,000 people in attendance at one of the 10 ISBA Fall Regional Meetings, you heard the report on the 2023 Legislative Priorities and received information in the booklet about the Legislative Action Network (LAN). This column will be a quick read to refresh you on what you need to know to lend your voice now during the legislative session. If you are a newer school board member or have been a casual observer of the state legislature and grassroots advocacy, please know that your voice matters. We need to be ready to be a strong voice and united champion for K-12 public education while

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advocating for the ISBA 2023 legislative priorities. Let us unite to collectively elevate our advocacy efforts, as much is at stake!

## HOW DOES ISBA SET ITS PRIORITIES?

ISBA relies on four committees comprised of regional representatives of our school board members to help provide leadership and direction to govern the work of the Association, including a Legislative Committee. This is a 20-member committee, with two school board members from each of the 10 ISBA regions. The Legislative Committee meets annually during the summer to discuss education policy and board governance matters. Its core duty is to set annual legislative priorities and develop and affirm foundational statements. The legislative priorities are a short list of proactive agenda items ISBA hopes to accomplish during each session to support our mission. The foundational statements are principles that guide the Association's positions on the many bills impacting K-12 education that are not explicitly addressed in the priorities. I liken the foundational statements to a compass and roadmap to ensure that we effectively represent your views. Once approved by the committee, these core documents move to the Delegate Assembly for adoption. Every school board is entitled to have a member represent it at the Delegate Assembly. The 2022 Delegate Assembly convened on October 3, 2022, where these documents were approved unanimously by voice vote.

## WHY IS YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN ADVOCACY SO IMPORTANT?

Especially at a time when social and political challenges confront K-12 public education more than ever before, your voice representing the best interests of Hoosier students must be heard. You have clout! You have firsthand understanding of your school corporation's goals, student achievement outcomes, and resource needs. You regularly deal with the complexities of school corporation budgeting and financial matters. You are an informed source of information about education policy. Finally, you have a story to tell and can relate how proposed legislation impacts your school community.

One bill comes to mind from the 2019 session to illustrate what the strength in numbers of school board members speaking up and out at the right time, and with a unified message, can achieve. Senate Bill 246 was on the third reading calendar in the Senate that would have greatly restricted when school corporations can conduct a referendum. This bill was adversarial to local control and would have restricted the ability of school corporations to generate necessary funds for projects, programs, or personnel. It took a tremendous effort and a timely response to a call-to-action alert from educators and school board members to contact area senators in opposition to the bill, to kill the bill. One legislator told

me that he changed his position to align with our position on the bill because he "heard from 12 constituents over the (prior) weekend asking for his vote against the bill." The senator considered this a significant number that was enough to sway his position. The bill was not called down on the last

day for the third reading of bills and we prevailed in killing the proposal. This is powerful evidence of what we can accomplish together!

Some might be inclined to think that their personal efforts will not make a difference, but this perspective leads to apathy. If we are not passionate to defend the pillar of American democracy, then why should we expect legislators to share our views and positions? Engagement in the advocacy process can make all the difference. Sharing "your local story" is impactful, too. To assist school board members to be successful advocates in the policymaking process, ISBA has created the Legislative Action Network.

## LEGISLATIVE ACTION NETWORK

While your ISBA lobby team strives to be in the right place at the right time, our two voices (Lisa Tanselle, General Counsel, and I) are more effective when our efforts are complemented by a troop of school board members participating in the Legislative Action Network, ISBA's formal grassroots advocacy program. The LAN is designed to help unify and mobilize "the voice" of school board members and increase State House visibility. Through this program, we provide you with the information, resources, strategies, and guidance to engage in the grassroots advocacy process. The program to cultivate and coordinate the localized grassroots

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advocacy efforts is through each school board's designated legislative liaison, although we encourage all board members to engage in grassroots advocacy.

## DUTIES OF THE LEGISLATIVE LIAISON

- ✓ Know and support the 2023 ISBA Legislative Priorities
- ✓ Know your area legislators: go to the IGA "find your legislator" website link: <http://iga.in.gov/legislative/find-legislators/>
- ✓ Track ISBA Legislative Services/LAN communications and provide timely updates on legislative session activities at school board meetings. We suggest making this a regular board meeting agenda item
- ✓ Identify ISBA legislative priorities for which you will be willing to testify, if necessary, during committee hearings on these bills
- ✓ Communicate regularly via email, phone calls, or letters with area legislators
- ✓ Make yourself a contact and trusted source for your legislators within your district
- ✓ Coordinate email, phone call, or letter writing campaigns to your area legislators, media, and the broader community, especially in response to call-to-action alerts
- ✓ Organize legislative forums or attend "Third House" meetings hosted by other organizations

To become your school corporation's Legislative Action Network Liaison, please have your superintendent send your name and preferred contact information to Casey Conrad at: [cconrad@isba-ind.org](mailto:cconrad@isba-ind.org).

## ISBA LEGISLATIVE SERVICES AND WEB RESOURCES

Legislative services are one of the four core services that ISBA provides to members. As mentioned, Lisa Tanselle, General Counsel, and I am your registered lobbyists who are your "boots on the ground." We cover committee hearings, testify on bills, and communicate regularly with legislators. The legislative services from ISBA include:

- ✓ State House representation
- ✓ Weekly ISBA legislative updates (typically every Friday during session)
- ✓ Bill tracking list service (updated in real time each session day)
- ✓ Live legislative update webinars (once per month)
- ✓ Call-to-action legislative alerts (as needed on critical issues)

- ✓ Website resources
- ✓ ISBA Advocacy Guide (third edition available on the Legislative Services page of the ISBA website)
- ✓ 5th Annual State House Day (February 21, 2023; more details below)

The first step in effective grassroots advocacy is to get informed. Preparation will make you a more confident and successful advocate. There are many resources available to help you build your knowledge base. The Legislative Services page of the ISBA website includes key resources to follow the 2023 session and adoption of new K-12 laws and is located at: <http://www.isba-ind.org/legislative.html>. The Indiana General Assembly website is naturally the best resource to track the activity of the legislature and is located at: <http://www.iga.in.gov>

## COME TO INDY FOR THE 5TH ANNUAL STATE HOUSE DAY FEBRUARY 21, 2023

Culminate your advocacy efforts and help ensure a successful legislative session for K-12 public education by participating in ISBA's 5th Annual State House Day on February 21, 2023. The State House Day event will include a briefing session on key K-12 education bills moving in the session, two legislator panels (one featuring the caucus leaders and one with the leaders of the education committees), and State House office visits or calls with your area legislators. We invite two members (preferably the board president and legislative liaison) to represent your board at this event. ISBA will be sending detailed information about this event, including registration, regularly beginning in January. If you have any questions about the event, please contact Casey Conrad ([cconrad@isba-ind.org](mailto:cconrad@isba-ind.org)) or me ([tspradlin@isba-ind.org](mailto:tspradlin@isba-ind.org)) with any questions.

## CONCLUSION

Be ready! Please take time to acquaint yourself with the full details of the ISBA 2023 Legislative Priorities and Foundational Statements. Resolve to write a letter, send an email, or make a call to your area legislators now and throughout the session. Together we are better when we stand up for Hoosier students and high-quality schools with a unified voice. Your local engagement and leadership are paramount to our success. Thank you for your ongoing contributions and response to the call-to-action to support K-12 public education in Indiana. Let's keep "fighting the good fight!" 🗡️