

Grassroots Action

by Ed Dickerson

No initial effort to improve homeschool legislation will succeed without strong grassroots support. Not every homeschool family will be able to drop everything and rush to the state capitol for a rally. Fewer still will be able to lobby legislators regularly. But everyone can be involved in homeschool politics at the grassroots level-without leaving home. Seem impossible? Let's take a look at how it works.

No matter how savvy and conscientious the lobbyist at the Statehouse, he will only be as effective as his ability to convince legislators that real people, their own constituents, want and will benefit from change. Long before the lawmaker casts a favorable vote, someone persuaded the legislator to do so. It is logical that homeschool families are most often the ones responsible for turning an unfavorable vote into a favorable one. If a majority of legislators favorable to homeschooling meets and votes at the statehouse, families all across the state forged that majority in their living rooms and at their kitchen tables.

It may surprise you to discover that your legislators really want to know your opinion. For the most part, people seek office because they want to make a difference; to improve their state or country. They may espouse means you fundamentally disagree with to accomplish that, but most of them are sincere. In order for them to make things better, they need to know what ordinary citizens want. In order for them to continue their careers, they need to get reelected. These needs provide two powerful reasons for them to listen to you. This does not mean that every legislator can be persuaded. Later on, we'll examine how to deal with those we cannot work with. Most, however, will be eligible for persuasion to your point of view. We turn next to that process.

Most people mistakenly believe that legislators are persuaded primarily by facts and statistics. Commonly, homeschoolers approach legislators with test scores, articles, and even books favoring home schooling. Legislators have no more faith in "studies" than the rest of us. Think of it. If a study came out tomorrow purporting to demonstrate that homeschooling deprived children of crucial experiences, would you just change your mind? I wouldn't. Neither will legislators change their cherished beliefs (or their votes) on the basis of studies by people they have never heard of.

Aristotle enumerated the principles of persuasion as ethos, pathos, and logos. They work as well with legislators as with anyone else. Ethos equals personal authority or character. In other words, "Why should you listen to me?" Pathos means to create a favorable state of mind, usually through an emotional bond or appeal. Logos provides the logical, rational presentation of the case. Rather than first, logic comes last. For homeschoolers speaking to legislators, the "ethos" part comes easy. As constituents, we are directly affected by the law on this issue, and we seek relief from our elected representative. If we bolster that through strict integrity in our dealings with the legislators, we will have a ready audience.

Pathos does the work. On issues like homeschooling, politicians vote with their emotions. If, when the word "homeschool" arises, they have only a stereotype of strange people with eccentric habits, they feel uncomfortable and they will vote against us. If, on the other hand, they visualize a friendly, happy family in their home district, they will feel comfortable with the concept. In this instance, we may persuade them to vote with us. Fortunately, any homeschool family can help create this favorable state of mind. When legislators get to know and feel comfortable with homeschoolers, we win.

Homeschooling presents most legislators with something radically outside of their own experience. No one gets elected to state office by promising to cripple the schools. Being seen as an opponent of the schools can easily lead to defeat at the polls. So, even the most favorable legislators usually greet the question about homeschooling by first reciting their support for public schools. People who do not choose to send their children to public school may be viewed initially as cultish or fanatical. Once legislators get to know us, that feeling dissipates. This work is crucial, and cannot be overemphasized. Let me give you an example.

Representative Seth Greene is from a rural district. He is unmarried, a lawyer, a classic liberal Democrat, and a strong labor advocate. This profile usually indicates strong opposition to homeschoolers and support of the teacher's union. But not Seth Greene. He told me, "I used to be against you people, but then I met the Van Dolson family. Ever since I met them, I'll do everything I can to help you." Doug Van Dolson pastored a conservative Christian church in Seth Greene's district. It would be difficult to imagine people with less in common. But the Van Dolsons were good, salt-of-the-earth people who met with Seth Greene, winning his heart and his vote. Seth Greene became a valuable ally in the Democratic caucus because one homeschool family made the effort to befriend him. Politicians need to speak to constituents, to keep their name recognition high, and to help motivate voters in their favor. So, offer them a forum. Have them attend your support group meeting. Let them address your group. Invite them to your home for a meal, and an evening of discussion with other homeschool families. When they see our children are well fed and cared for, that we don't eat our young, that we are "just folks," they learn to trust us, to have confidence in homeschooling. Politicians always welcome these opportunities, especially during campaigns.

If you don't feel comfortable inviting a politician to your own home, perhaps you can arrange a meeting with several families in the local library, or a bank community room, or meet in a friend's home. Every contact further cements your relationship, increases the likelihood that they will look favorably on our cause. Of course, though few in number, the hard cases do exist. But the example of Seth Greene should prevent you from jumping to conclusions. Unless you ask, unless you make the effort, you cannot know whether the politician can be persuaded or not. In those few cases where the politician makes it clear they are not to be swayed, you have little choice but to work for their replacement. Elections to the state legislature usually turn on very small numbers of votes. Even seemingly "safe" seats can come up for grabs. Candidates trying to unseat incumbents are especially eager to meet with potential supporters. Contacting them early in the campaign works to the advantage of all. Should they be successful, they will long remember your early help, making them staunch supporters.

Once they have come to believe in homeschoolers as people, lawmakers will favor homeschool legislation that brings relief, and will oppose legislation that would oppress. At this point, Logos comes in. Rather than us convincing them, they will convince each other. They will use the reasons, the statistics, and the studies as justification for their votes. The real justification will be their emotional connection with homeschool families they trust.

Every family can have a part in building the legislative majority that will make or keep homeschooling free, without ever rallying outside the capitol or putting on a suit and lobbying legislators in their office. All it takes is courtesy, kindness, and hospitality. No initial effort to improve homeschool legislation will succeed without strong grassroots support. Not every homeschool family will be able to drop everything and rush to the state capitol for a rally. Fewer still will be able to lobby legislators regularly. But everyone can be involved in homeschool politics at the grassroots level-without leaving home. Seem impossible? Let's take a look at how it

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