



Texas Association of School Boards

TASB Governmental Relations **Texas Legislative Witness Guide**

School board members are the elected officials charged with governing Texas school districts. As such, school board members have a unique understanding of the challenges facing their districts and the solutions necessary to address those challenges.

Texas school board members must communicate that information to state and federal elected officials to inform the education policymaking that occurs in Austin and Washington, DC. School board members can share information with legislators through in-person meetings, telephone calls, e-mails, and by testifying before legislative committees. TASB's Governmental Relations (GR) staff can help arrange those meetings, and the GR website (www.gr.tasb.org) has online tools that make it easy for board members to identify and contact their elected representatives. Additionally, this guide is provided to help school board members feel more comfortable about testifying before the legislative committees in Austin.

How the Legislature Works

The Texas Legislature is a bicameral legislature that meets regularly in each odd-numbered year or when called into a special session by the governor. There are 150 members of the Texas House of Representatives and 31 members of the Texas Senate.

The Legislature works through a committee process to pass legislation. Committee members are selected by the presiding officer of each chamber – the Speaker of the House and the Lieutenant Governor, who oversees the Senate.

Once a legislator files a bill, it is sent to the appropriate committee for a hearing. The committee assignment is determined by the subject matter of the bill. Each committee holds hearings on its assigned bills. Under the Open Meetings Act, legislative committees must post the issues and/or proposed bills they intend to discuss at least five days prior to a hearing. During a special session, committees must post hearing notices at least 24 hours prior to a hearing. When hearings are called from the floor of either the House or Senate, a committee must give notice at least two hours before a hearing.

Once the committee hearing has been scheduled, the legislators on the committee may request that certain witnesses testify on a bill or an issue under consideration. Additionally, the committee allocates time during the hearing for the public to provide testimony. In most cases, school board members will testify during the public testimony portion of the hearing. Since legislative committee meetings and state agency hearings are open meetings, all proceedings and testimony are public record, and are documented. Additionally, committee hearings are generally broadcast via the Internet. Links to the House and Senate chambers and to various state agency web sites are available on TASB GR's web site (www.gr.tasb.org).

For a detailed description of the legislative process, visit: <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/capitol/legproc/summary.htm>

What Happens During a Committee Hearing

TASB Governmental Relations may ask school board members to testify before a legislative committee when a proposed bill directly addresses a priority or position included in the TASB Advocacy Agenda. However, all school board members are encouraged to advocate their districts' interests before the legislature.

Once you arrive at a committee hearing to testify, you will be required to sign a witness affirmation form stating:

- your name;
- your school district and/or the other organization you are representing;
- your contact information;
- the bill or issue on which you are testifying; and,
- whether you support, oppose or wish to remain neutral on that bill or issue.

When the hearing begins, the committee chair will announce the bill number being considered and will then begin calling witnesses who have signed up to testify on the bill. When you are called up to testify, it is important to keep three things in mind:

- begin your comments by thanking the committee;
- limit your comments to between three to five minutes, or the time limit imposed by the chair; and,
- be ready to answer questions.

By testifying on an issue, you are making a valuable contribution to the creation of the policies that govern Texas' public schools.

Bring several copies of your testimony, as it is customary to provide hard copies of your testimony for each member of the committee.

Once testimony has been heard on a bill, the committee may vote on the bill, amend it, delay it for further discussion, or ask for more information. Bills delayed for discussion or voted down may reappear as another bill or an amendment to another bill, so it is advisable to monitor TASB communications for updates on legislative and regulatory activities.

Tips for Preparing Testimony

As you develop your testimony, keep these important points in mind:

Develop a concise message – Focus on three or four message points you want to emphasize. Prioritize those points and deliver the most important ones first in case there is not enough time to deliver all of them. A

template for developing your testimony is attached as an Appendix to this document.

Focus on local impact – Illustrate your message points with data, statistics, or a brief anecdote about how the proposed bill/issue will affect your district. The point of your testimony is to tell your local story.

Get the facts straight – Be as accurate as possible and give credit to the source of information to increase your credibility and protect yourself if the details turn out to be incorrect.

Know the legislators' areas of interest – Your testimony will be most persuasive if it addresses the issues that are most important to the committee members. Tools on the TASB GR website can provide biographical information about each committee member and can help you identify the bills the member has authored.

Tips for Testifying

As you prepare to testify, keep these tips in mind:

Build rapport – Acknowledge the committee members and thank them for allowing you to testify. Try to keep good eye contact with and address your comments directly to the members.

Summarize points – Avoid reading written testimony. Simply summarize the key points verbally and provide copies of written testimony to all members of the committee, staff, news media, and other observers.

Avoid repetition – Legislators often hear much boring, repetitious testimony, so make yours memorable. Be sincere. Be yourself. Don't become too emotional or dramatic. Waive the opportunity to speak if several others have already said what you wanted to say, but remember to distribute written copies of your testimony.

Be honest and helpful – Often, the committee members will ask questions of people who testify. Answer questions as honestly as you can. If you don't know the answer, say so or defer to a TASB staff member. TASB GR staff will follow up with the legislator who asked the question and/or the entire committee after the hearing.

Avoid confrontation – If a member of the committee asks a hostile question, diffuse the hostility by remaining poised. Even if the committee seems opposed to your perspective, your testimony may earn their respect, educate those attending the hearing, and/or at least prove that opposition exists.

Dress conservatively – You do not want to distract legislators from listening to your message. Business attire is appropriate.

Getting around the Capitol, parking, eating and sleeping

Logistics of the Capitol and Other State Agencies

The Capitol is located at the intersection of Congress Avenue and 11th Street in Austin. The entire complex covers several city blocks, and the building is accessible from several entrances.

Parking closest to the Capitol is available in the State Visitor Parking Garage at San Jacinto and 12th Streets for a minimal charge. TASB GR staff will often not be able to accompany you to/from the parking garage due to ongoing committee hearings. However the area around the Capitol is relatively safe, even late at night.

Useful maps of the Capitol and surrounding buildings are available on the State Preservation Board's web site:

www.tspb.state.tx.us/SPB/Plan/FloorPlan/FlorPlan.htm.

Committees usually meet in hearing rooms located in the Capitol Extension (the underground portion of the Capitol). At times, committees will hold hearings on the Senate chamber floor or in other rooms in the Capitol. It is important to contact TASB GR, the committee clerk, or agency staff on the morning of the hearing to verify its location. Another resource is the Texas Legislature Online website, (<http://www.legis.state.tx.us/MnuCommittees.aspx>) which provides the schedule and location of committee meetings.

Rooms in the Capitol Extension are designated with the letter "E" indicating that the room is in the Capitol Extension, followed by the room number (e.g. E1.123, E2.123). The first number following the "E" indicates which floor of the extension the room is on. A room number that begins with "2" means the room is on the second floor of the extension (e.g. E2.123), while a room number starting with "1" means that it is on the lower, first floor (e.g. 1.123).

In the main Capitol building, rooms are denoted with an "E, S, W," or "N" to designate whether the room is on the east, south, west, or north side of the building, followed by the floor and room number (e.g. NG.1 – north wing, ground floor, room 1; W2.5 – west wing, second floor, room 5)

Most state agencies, including the Texas Education Agency, are located in state office buildings within walking distance of the Capitol. Some, such as the Higher Education Coordinating Board, are located in other parts of Austin. Parking for state agencies is also available at the State Visitor Parking Garage or at a street parking meter, so remember to bring quarters.

At any state office building, security guards may require you to show picture identification and the contents of your belongings (i.e., your purse or briefcase) upon entering the building. Be prepared for increased security measures during the legislative session or after any national security alert.

Restaurants Near the Capitol

The State Capitol has a cafeteria, the Capitol Grill, located in the Capitol Extension, Room E1.002. This is open to the public Monday – Friday, 7:30 am – 5:00 pm.

The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum, which is a few blocks north of the Capitol, has The Story of Texas Cafe, located on the museum's second floor. The cafe is open Monday – Saturday, 10:00 am – 5:00 pm and Sunday, 12 noon – 5:00 pm.

There are also several renowned restaurants within walking distance of the Capitol:

The Texas Chili Parlor, 1409 Lavaca Street (15th and Lavaca Street, about 0.4 miles west of the Capitol)

Brick Oven Pizza, 1209 Red River Street (12th and Red River Street, about 0.6 miles east of the Capitol)

Serrano's Café and Cantina, 1111 Red River Street (near 11th and Red River Street, about 0.7 miles east of the Capitol)

Hickory Street Bar and Grille, 800 Congress Avenue (corner of 8th and Congress Ave., about 0.6 miles south of the Capitol)

The Roaring Fork, 701 Congress Avenue (corner of 7th and Congress Ave., about 0.6 miles south of the Capitol)

There are several other restaurants along Congress Avenue, south of the Capitol.

Hotels Close to the Capitol

There are many Austin hotels located downtown, some within walking distance of the Capitol. These include:

Sheraton Austin Hotel, 701 East 11th Street, (512) 478-1111

The Driskill Hotel, 604 Brazos Street, (512) 474-5911

Doubletree Guest Suites, 303 West 15th Street, (512) 478-7000

La Quinta Inn, 300 East 11th Street, (512) 476-1166

Omni Austin Hotel, 700 San Jacinto Street, (512) 476-3700

Hyatt Regency Austin, 208 Barton Springs Road, (512) 477-1234

Expenses

If you come to Austin to testify at the request of TASB, meals will be provided. Contact TASB GR for further information.

Questions?

If you have any questions, please contact TASB Governmental Relations at 800-580-4885. We look forward to helping you advocate on behalf of Texas' public schools districts.

Appendix A ***Testimony Template***

The following template is provided as a guideline. As you develop your testimony, focus on how the proposed legislation will impact your district, as supported by facts and anecdotes. Remember to prioritize your message points so that you state your most important points first.

I am testifying in support of/opposition to HB/SB #_____ because:

- (1) Message 1: The legislation would change current law (how) and would have a positive/negative impact on my district and districts across Texas.
 - a. Data showing impact on/cost to your school district
 - b. Story illustrating impact on your school district

- (2) Message 2: The change in the law would also help/hurt my district by...
 - a. Data showing impact on/cost to your school district
 - b. Story illustrating impact on your school district

- (3) Message 3: An alternative approach that would be better for Texas school districts would be to...