

Speaking out against Harmful Legislation

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, it is extremely important to speak out against legislation that may negatively affect our lives or the lives of those around us. Whether it be part of national, state, or local legislation, it's important to know how to best speak up and make your voice heard. In this document, we will explore practical steps in which you can take in order to most effectively speak out against these harmful policy proposals. By engaging with us, you can become an advocate for the causes that mean the most to you, opposing policy that is detrimental to the progression of our society, making a positive impact on your community.

We understand that this may sound like a daunting task, especially if you feel your voice may not be heard or you may face negative consequences for speaking out. However, building up courage is essential to becoming an effective advocate for desired change. It's important to know that speaking out against harmful legislation is your right and responsibility as a member of your community. Use this document to guide you on how to best communicate your ideas, and don't hesitate to reach out to us or like-minded individuals who may be having the same trouble with courage. Make sure that you are well-educated on the issue and the impacts of the legislation. This will take practice, persistence, and determination, but we know you can do it.

The steps to identifying harmful policy and legislation

- 1. Research:** Know what you are dealing with. Read the actual text of the policy, news articles, watch interviews, and review other official documents that pertain to the policy.
- 2. Understand consequences:** How will this policy affect your community? Who will be impacted? Does it compromise rights and freedoms of individuals?
- 3. Survey:** Consult with others. Don't think solely about how the policy may affect communities, but specific individuals. Personal stories can draw a picture of the real life impacts, and can make you more passionate about the purpose of your advocacy work.
- 4. There is no formula to identify harmful policy. If you feel that a certain piece of legislation may have a negative impact on you and your community, don't be afraid to speak out.**

Find school board / legislation information online

1. If the legislation is local, such as in your county or school district, know your rights. It's a good idea to learn about the type of State Board of Education your state has. Check out this guide to best frame your advocacy if you're target is a State Board of Education: [Nationwide School Board Information](#).
2. If the legislation is from your state or county, it may be a good idea to look on their website in order to best gauge how policies are debated and passed into law. Don't be afraid to contact your local Council Member, School Board Member, Congressperson, or members of the State House or Senate for advice. If that's not possible, continue your research and learn about the legislative practice of your area.

3. If the legislation is a federal policy, make sure that your research reflects that. Understand the impacts of a policy all over the country through different lenses. Social, political, and economical points of view can help narrow this research.

Once you've conducted your research and are ready to start voicing your opinion, you may want to start drafting public comments and petitions related to your issue...

Register for public comments at school board meetings, legislative hearings, etc.

Check out this link for information on how to speak at school board meetings or make public comments:

[Public Comment Guide](#)

Draft petition

Refer to this guide for writing a petition: [Petition Guide](#)

What comes next?

1. We commend you for taking the steps to bettering your community by speaking out against harmful legislation. Change won't happen overnight—it may be a good idea to continuously follow up with key decision makers to make sure your voice is properly heard.
2. Continue to register for opportunities to provide public comments at school board meetings, recruit a friend to provide comments with you, and continue to receive signatures on your petitions. Voices are powerful individually, but together, multiple voices may be able to catalyze your push for change.

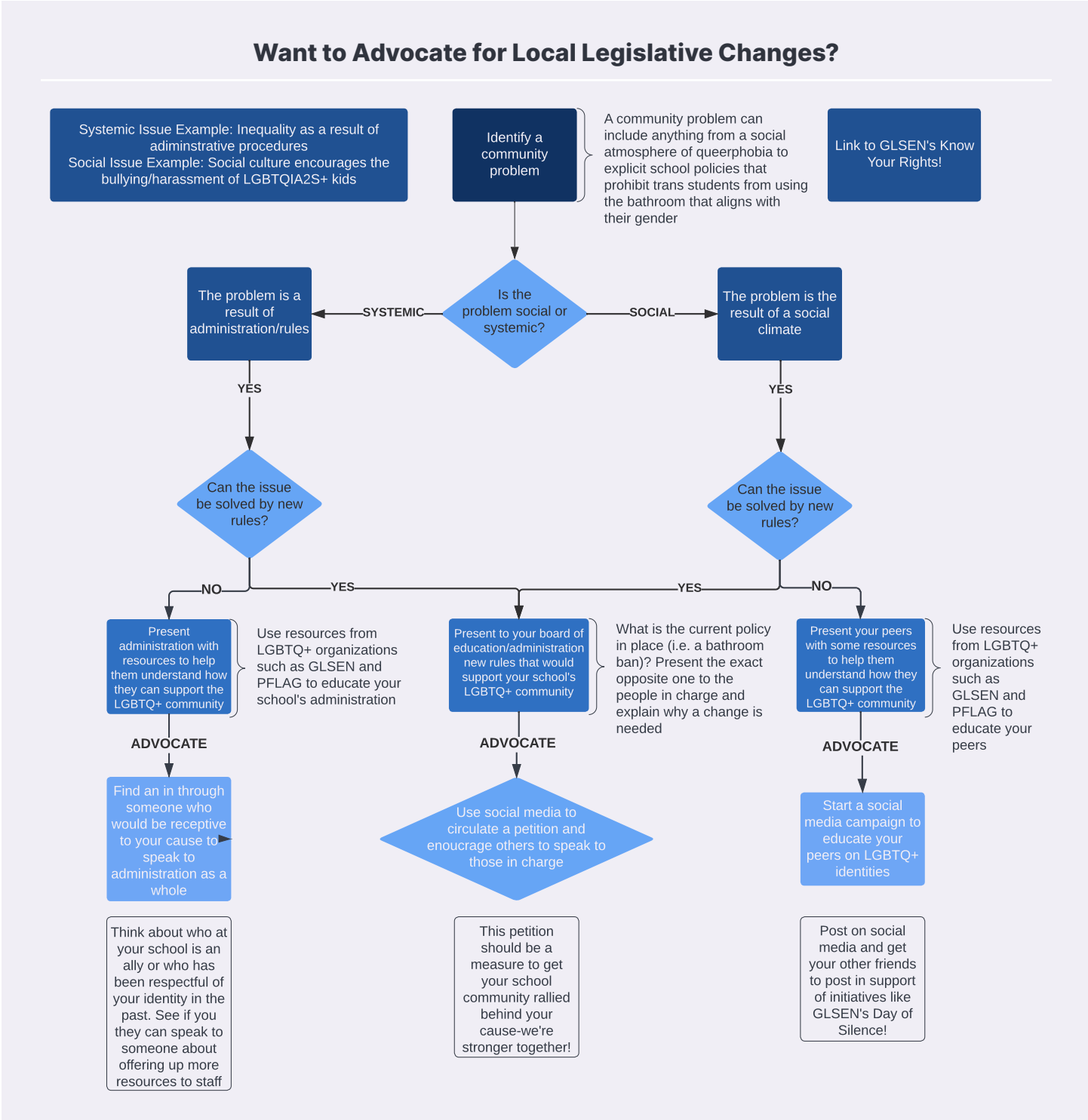
CONCLUSION

Speaking out against harmful legislation and policy is not your right, but your responsibility. It may seem challenging at first, but your voice matters and you can make a difference. By conducting thorough research, registering to provide comments at public forums, drafting petitions, writing your legislator, and speaking with community members, you can effectively identify these policies and push for change.

It is through our individual and collective efforts that we can bring attention to these issues and advocate for this change. We understand that this takes passion, perseverance, and determination, but spreading what we believe in will help so many individuals inside and outside your community. Together, we can shape a better future for ourselves and generations to come.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Check out this flowchart on how to advocate for local legislative change!



Petition Guide

How to figure out your target audience

Knowing your target audience allows you to reach people who care about the topic and expand the subject's awareness to new people. And also, knowing the target audience allows better strategic planning to get more signatures and advocacy for the petition. There are two groups of the targeted audience: who is signing and receiving the petition? What questions should you ask to figure out?

- **Interest:** What is the subject? Who will be interested in the topic?
- **Subcultures:** Does the subject relate to any subcultures or experiences someone can tell?

By going through these questions, you should have a few groups of targeted audiences in your mind. It can be small, like certain high schoolers, or significant to the whole county, state or even the nation. Knowing your target audience will allow you to figure out your marketing plan and know where to start.

Now figuring out who is signing the petition should help you with the next step of figuring out who is receiving the petition. Think more about the path of government or people in power that can make a change within the subject. Here are some questions to consider.

1. **Intention:** What is the goal or purpose of the petition? Who will be affected by the plan, and how?
2. **Power of Subject:** Who is in the position of power within the subject of the petition? Is there a specific person that is able to make a decision about implementing your "ask"?

Once you know who you should reach or which branch of power to reach, start looking for contact information. Checking for websites, phone numbers, locations, emails, and even personal connections through social media will be beneficial.

How to form a petition

A petition has three main parts: subject matter, statement, and name signing.

1. **Subject Matter:** Here is where you write a clear and concise statement to identify the subject matter. It can be a personal experience or just to raise awareness. In short, this section is where you recognize what the subject matter is and why it impacts you.
2. **Statement:** The statement describes what outcome you wish to address through the petition. It can be a promise or change of the subject matter.
3. **Name Signing:** This can look like a table with columns for name, address, contact information, and a place (most importantly) for the signatures.

What are your rights using a petition?

First Amendment: Freedom of Speech. Your right to form and market a petition is protected by the first amendment. It was, and continues to be, a right for all people to criticize the government and speak their minds without fear of being censored or persecuted.

Location: Please note that specific places, like schools or private settings, may have the right to limit your power to market and advocate your petition. Before supporting your petition or asking for your signatures, please ensure with appropriate decision-makers that you can market your petition.

Privacy rights: Many people are concerned about putting private information on a petition but want to support the subject. Please know that first names only or initials are also allowed for a petition. The purpose of a petition is to show solidarity on a subject matter, so the accuracy and number of signatures matter more than anything else.

Age limit: There is no clear indication that only certain ages can form petitions. EVERYONE can create their petition on matters of their interests.

How to gain signatures with a petition

Social Media: Social media is the best way to promote a petition, especially among students and youth. Create e-versions of the petition, too (google forms are good tools). This allows people to simply share the petition with one click and market to more people.

Don't be afraid to speak up: Talk to organization leaders for the opportunity to speak at events to promote the petition. Some ideas may include school news, club meetings, school events, volunteering events, local news, etc. Sometimes even having the teachers, parents, or other community members promote them within classrooms and their own homes help too.

Reach new people: Don't be afraid to speak to someone new. Sometimes it is all just accessible as a "hey." Many youth and students are more interested in advocacy than you believe, but it is common for them to reject the petition or offer counter-views. Keep an open mind, and you are doing great.

Next steps

Submitting the petition: Submitting the petition can be easy as an email or a simple mail. Ensure the content includes who started the petition form (organization or individual), what is the subject matter, the importance of the subject matter, and what is the goal outcome. Also, submit the petition template to the receiver.

Keep Supporting the Petition and the Subject Matter: Continue to speak up and advocate for the subject matter. The job is not done once the petition is submitted. You got this!

Contact the Petition Receiver: Follow-up emails and phone calls to the petition receiver are a great help. It allows you to have the most recent feedback to your advocacy but also allows the receiver to share their input.

Example petition

Topic: Book Banning in [District]

Target Audience (to sign): Middle Schoolers and High Schoolers within the District

Target Audience (to receive): District School Board and Superintendent

Petition Template:

Background and Purpose

During the District School Board of Education Work Public Session on September XX, 20XX, a section of the book, *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, was read by the board. The preceding discussion proposed the removal of the publication from libraries as a result of the description of a sexually explicit scene in the novel.

During subsequent board meetings on September XX, 20XX, and October XX, 20XX, parents, teachers, and other community members discussed their individual points of view in regard to the removal of books, specifically *Looking for Alaska*.

However, students, the individuals who would most be affected by the removal of the novel from media collections, were not represented in public discussions.

The purpose of the petition is to give a voice to the students, particularly in opposing the removal of media collections, including but not limited to *Looking for Alaska*.

Petition responses were collected using the Google Forms platform.

The main viewpoints from students to lead to the conclusion of opposing “Book Review” includes the following:

- Through public comments at the Board of Education Business Meeting, we are afraid this could be a **tactic used to oppress marginalized groups; a growing trend occurring throughout the nation on the topic of book banning**. These groups include the LGBTQ+ community, especially those who are transgender. Parents would be able to submit requests based on their disagreement with sexual orientation and/or gender identity to remove such material from schools. The removal of content would create a lack of representation in our media collections and fear in students for seeing the identity they are a part of being “banned.”
- **We need to trust our hired professionals when they do their job.** We believe in our fellow teachers, school administrations, and media center organizers that they will not allow truly inappropriate content within our schools.
- **The process lacks “Checks and Balances”.** The proposed procedure allows for submissions to be made to appeal to the Board of Education. This process may be used to prevent material from being properly evaluated by school and district review committees.
- Through the transparency of school media and teaching material, parents can already inform the school on topics they would like their child not to be exposed to. **However, “Book Review” would allow parents or possibly any community member (with or without a child in the district) to censor materials for all students.** Who are they to decide what “other children” can and cannot read?
- Every person can interpret materials differently, and that’s the beauty of literature. Reading and being exposed to different materials allows students to open their worldviews and build important characteristics like **sympathy** and **understanding**. **Having less diverse media collections could decrease students’ opportunities to improve these characteristics.**

We, the below signatories, ask the Board to reject proposal XXX and all other policies relating to restriction of library materials to students.

<p>Timestamp</p>	<p>By entering my name, I show support for the opposition of book banning in Cabarrus County Schools.</p> <p>(Last, First)</p>	<p>Grade</p>
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Submitted Form: Email with Petition Data Analyzation and Student Comments.

Next Step: Continue to speak at the Public Comment section of School Board and County Commission meetings. Keep in close contact with the board, media specialists, and teachers.

Making a Public Comment at a School Board Meeting

How to sign up for public comment

Each district has different guidelines and procedures for public comments. To find out what those are, go to your school board’s website (look up your school district + “board of education”).

Sometimes, the school district and the school board have different websites. If so, you’re looking for the one that says “board of education,” “superintendent of schools,” or something similar. It should have information about the members of the board and meeting schedules. You can usually find the school board’s website linked on the school district’s website.

Once on the website, look for a section with meeting schedules or agendas. Every school district is required to make its meeting schedule public so that the community can be involved. However, some districts will not post the dates / open sign-ups for public comment until a few days before the meeting, so you should check back regularly if you can’t find the next date. You may have to search around a bit to find the school district’s guidelines and sign-up procedure to speak at a meeting.

Every school district has different guidelines, so make sure to read them thoroughly and follow them! Even if they say something is only recommended, you should follow it if you can.

How to write your comment

Think of a public comment like a short argumentative essay. You have to introduce the problem, explain why it’s important, and propose a solution or two. A good comment can take many forms, but if you’re unsure where to start, follow this structure. (See the sample script on the next page for examples of each section.)

1. Intro:

- Say hello and introduce yourself with your name, age, and school, if appropriate.
- Keep this part brief so you can get to your point!

2. Background:

- Explain the problem in simple terms. The board members may not even realize this is an issue, or they may never have heard a student's perspective on it.
- At the end of this section, you can include a sentence saying "I'm here because...". If the school board knows that the issue personally affects you, they might be more likely to listen to your point of view.

3. Why it's important:

- Data can be useful here! Some links for finding figures about common themes affecting LGBTQ+ students are:
 - The 2021 National School Climate Survey
 - PEN Book Bans Report
- This is a good time to mention any personal experiences, either your own or others', illustrating how the issue affects students. If you use someone else's story, be sure to get their permission first.

4. Ask(s):

- Clearly state the changes you would like the board to do to address the problem. These should be concrete actions they can do, such as striking out a district policy, implementing a new one, or publishing school guidelines that get sent to all the principals.
- Remember to thank the board members at the end!

Sample public comment script

Intro: Good morning. My name is John Smith, I'm 15 years old, and I'm a sophomore at George Washington High School in the County Unified School District. With me are 14 other CUSD students and 11 parents, faculty, and staff who are here to support my cause.

Background: Last year, CUSD instituted a policy allowing PTAs to ban books from school libraries and classrooms that contain "sexual content or obscenity." Since then, 9 out of the 10 schools in the district have removed all books with LGBT themes from their libraries and classrooms. That's 20 books total banned from County schools due to the characters' sexual orientation. I'm here because I am gay, and banning these books means that I don't get to learn about people like me because a few of my classmates' parents believe my sexuality and who I am is inappropriate.

Why it's important: Studies show that students who see themselves represented at school do better on standardized tests, have better attendance, and are suspended less than students who don't. A friend of mine said that because of the book ban, she doesn't feel like the administration wants her at our school, so she isn't motivated to do her homework or show up in class.

Ask: Therefore, we ask that you reverse this policy and allow teachers to decide what books are appropriate for their own schools and classrooms. This won't expose kids to obscenity, but rather show them that their school cares about all parts of them and wants to help them grow. Thank you for your time and consideration.

What rights you have (and don't have)

Rights you have: First Amendment rights

The First Amendment protects your right to speak out against unfair policies and advocate for change. You cannot be prevented from voicing your opinion just because people disagree or because it challenges a government institution like a school board. In fact, political speech (speech relating to the state, government, or public administration) is specially protected because it's recognized as fundamental to democracy.

Rights you don't have: Time, place, and manner

While the school board can't prevent you from saying your piece, they can place restrictions on how you say it. There are three categories of restrictions they are allowed to make:

1. **Time:** The board may schedule your comment for a certain time during the meeting, such as at the end. They can also restrict your comment to a time limit.
2. **Place:** For example, the board may require you to be physically present while you are making your comment.
3. **Manner:** The board may require that you remain under a certain noise level, do not use profanity, etc. as long as they do not restrict your actual content.

Additionally, the board may impose other restrictions in the interest of public safety. This likely won't apply to you; just don't bring a weapon or threaten anyone, and you should be fine.

The school board is not allowed to cut you off during your allotted speaking time! It is unlikely that they will try to do this or be otherwise blatantly disrespectful. However, if they do, you may continue, or if they will not allow you to, politely but firmly restate your right to voice your opinion at the meeting.

Other important aspects

Confirm the time and location. Occasionally meetings have to be rescheduled, or may even move to an online platform. Make sure to continuously check the meeting logistics to ensure you're up-to-date.

Read the agenda beforehand. Some school boards separate general comments from comments related to particular agenda items. Additionally, you want to be familiar with the agenda so that you are prepared for your time to speak.

Print an outline. Most school boards do not require you to bring an outline of your comment, but they may appreciate one so that they can follow along as you speak. If your script is well-organized, you can use that. Otherwise, you can write a brief handout with your major points, emphasizing your ask(s). Make sure to print enough for all the board members, plus a few extras.

Bring support. The more people you have supporting you in the audience, the more impactful your comment will be. Additionally, some school boards have a policy that if you have at least a certain number of people, you can speak for a longer duration. More support is always better!

Types of School Boards

What type of State Board of Education do you have?

If your state board of education members are elected by the people, it is best to frame your issue as one that is widely supported by the people. Elected officials are motivated by pleasing their constituents and making moves to get them re-elected.

If your state board of education members are appointed by the governor or some other legislative body, it is best to frame the desired outcome as one that fits the agenda of whoever appointed the board members. Appointed board members make decisions that fit the agenda of those who appointed them so as to get re-appointed.

Find your local and school board district here: <https://xqsuperschool.org/school-board-lookup>