

On the Hill



A New Year in Advocacy

2014: A time for more aggressive advocacy on Capitol Hill



Reginald Felton

WITH THE SECOND SESSION OF THE 113TH Congress having convened in January, school board members across the nation must determine how they will intensify their grassroots advocacy with their *elected* members of Congress.

I emphasize *elected* to remind us all that these members of Congress are chosen by a democratic process that requires them to be responsible and accountable to their voters. Regardless of party affiliation, school board

members and other local voters expect their members of Congress to support a legislative education agenda that is in the best interest of all students.

While education continues to be included among the top priorities identified by candidates seeking election or current members of Congress seeking re-election, such strongly voiced commitment does not appear to be reflected in their collective actions taken during the first session of the Congress in 2013. This is even more disappointing as we review their collective actions addressing public education in recent years.

A UNIFIED VOICE

Without question, the most important

federal legislation impacting our public schools after funding is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

One clear example of major importance to all of us is how Congress will ensure that adequate federal funding will be available to states and school districts as we raise the bar for academic achievement for all students.

With very serious concerns over the impact of sequestration and further reductions in federal investments for our public schools, school board members and other public education advocates must join together with a unified voice to sustain funding as these legislative issues continue to be debated in Congress.

School board members understand that there are ideological differences between the Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill. However, they and other public education advocates should and must be clear regarding their expectations of their members

of Congress when it comes to such an important national value and commitment as education.

After all, when the democratic process was created, it was envisioned that, while differences of opinion would exist, ultimately the majority would rule. Additionally, democracy goes much further in expecting that members of Congress be accountable to their voters in the same way school board members are accountable to their constituents.

When there are different views being expressed at the local school board table regarding local school district policies and programs, the voters expect that these differences will be addressed and debated. They understand that compromises may be necessary to ensure that the needs of all students will be met. Why should school board members expect any less from their elected officials in Washington?

GRASSROOTS EFFORTS

As public education advocates, school board members understand the power of local grassroots efforts, whether directed in support of or in opposition to proposed decisions related to education programs, school construction, boundary changes, or student activities. As local school board members, they understand that they are accountable to their voters.

Board members understand that,

when residents within their school district have different positions as to the best course of actions, they and their board colleagues must work it out. Ultimately, actions must be in the best interest of all students.

And in some instances when those differences cannot be resolved, it is the democratic process—the decision by the majority of the board—that must prevail. Congress must no longer defer making critical decisions related to public education or improving our public schools, including federal funding decisions and the reauthorization of ESEA.

So when it comes to enacting effective federal education policy that recognizes the need for and the value of local flexibility and governance, where is the accountability to the local voters and where is the outrage?

And when it comes to appropriating sufficient federal funding for public education, which at minimum covers the cost of federal requirements imposed on our local schools, where is the accountability to the local voters and where is the outrage?

School board members and other advocates for public schools can no longer be passive when it comes to our public schools. We must build stronger coalitions with business owners, community and faith-based organizations, and other community leaders to send a clear message to Congress that the future of our nation globally rests on our ability to effectively educate every student.

With only a few months remaining before congressional election cam-



ONLINE EXTRA

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paigns will be in full swing, school board members in every congressional district and state must send a clear message to their members of Congress that ESEA must be reauthorized in 2014. Continued deferral of the reauthorization of ESEA cannot be an option.

FRIENDS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

In order to intensify our advocacy efforts, NSBA and our state school boards associations are actively engaged in expanding our network for *year-round advocacy*. With more than 13,500 school boards and 90,000 school board members, not only do we want to engage all of our school board members across the nation, but also to recruit other public education supporters to become members of the National School Boards Action Center's (NSBAC) Friends of Public Education.

As part of this national grassroots network, school board members and others have the opportunity to contact their U.S. Representatives and Senators to urge them to support federal legislation that provides high-quality education to America's public school children.

Those who sign up will receive information on critical education legislation and will be asked to contact members of Congress at key strategic times during the legislative process.

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