

Building Relationships with Candidates

Strong relationships build trust and help ensure that policymakers know who you are, how you can be helpful, and why your mission is important. This is as true for candidates who are running for elected office as it is for policymakers who already hold their positions, but there are special things to remember when you are building relationships with candidates. If you are able to build a connection with them, candidates may be more likely to listen to what you have to say, participate in your events, and support policies that advance your goals if/when they are elected to public office. Remember, today's school board member is tomorrow's senator. Put time into cultivating relationships, and your efforts will pay off—in the short term and the long term! Here are some tips to help (and check out [NAEYC's Mastering Meetings with Policy Makers](#) for some additional tips and tricks).

1 Build Good Relationships with Campaign Staff and Volunteers

Candidates and elected officials rely on their staff; your relationships with the staff define your relationship with the candidate. Being pleasant and helpful goes a long way. If you treat a staff member poorly or fail to follow up as promised, your invitations and requests for meetings may go unanswered.

2 Build Good Relationships across Party Lines

It is important not to rule out specific groups or political parties as potential supporters. When you are building relationships, keep an open mind, and reach out to those on both sides of the aisle.

3 Build Good Relationships with Trusted Advisors to Candidates

Candidates (and elected officials) have trusted advisors on specific policy topics. Find out who your candidates' trusted advisors on early learning are, and reach out to them. You may want to eventually become a trusted advisor yourself; but in the meantime, work to position your organization as a key resource and influencer in the field.

4 Be Knowledgeable about the Political Landscape and Elected Officials and about the Candidates and Issues on the Ballot

Ensure that everyone involved in your organization's electoral activities knows the names of the candidates for their own and, if applicable, the organization's local, state, and federal representatives, as well as the relevant issues on the ballot and the candidates' positions on those issues.

6 Understand the Policy-Making Process

Each local and state electoral body has its own process and time line for policy making and budgeting. Each election also has important dates and processes related to voter registration and voting. Knowing the process and time line will ensure that you spend your time efficiently and effectively, and that you never arrive at the table when dinner is already over!

7 Make Sure Your Staff, Champions, and Followers Are All Using the Same Message

Having a clear and consistent message is important in advocacy efforts. When you develop your messaging, be sure to train your staff—and anyone else who will be speaking on behalf of your organization—on using appropriate messaging and responding to specific points and help them understand how to respond to opposition.

8 Take Time to Research the Person You Will Be Meeting

Before you meet someone for the first time, research their personal history (bio on their website, social media, etc.), determine which issues are important to them, review their voting record, and identify opportunities to make a personal connection (e.g., do they have young children? Are they a grandparent?)

9 Show an Interest in Their Interests

Ask about their priorities, what they think, and why. Position yourself as a subject matter expert, but connect with their interests. Do not assume the candidate has anything but an introductory level of knowledge about your issue—you are the expert, and you can influence the candidate's policy priorities, position statements, and campaign promises.

10 Don't Waste Time

Be prepared and succinct—the candidate will not have much time. Practice explaining 3 to 5 key points, and prepare a few questions for the candidate related to early childhood education. If you are distributing materials about your organization or about early childhood, be sure the materials are succinct, contain consistent messaging, and are easy to navigate.

11 Know How to Respond to Opposition

Understand the other side of the story you are telling, and be prepared to respond and neutralize—but do not attack!

These tips have been adapted from the guide "Building an Effective Nonpartisan Electoral Strategy," on the NAEYC website. You can search through the larger guide [here](#).
