



# Advocacy 101

Trying Together supports high-quality care and education for young children by providing advocacy, community resources, and professional growth opportunities for the needs and rights of children, their families, and the individuals who interact with them. Through our statewide advocacy work we engage and collaborate with local early learning programs to advocate for increased investments in pre-k, child care, and home visiting, as well as policies that best support young children, educators, and families.

This article will provide an overview of two important ways to engage decision makers: (1) how to advocate for your issue during the state budget process and (2) tips for submitting written public comments and feedback on state regulations that impact your work and community. Our examples are specific to the early childhood education field but we hope you can apply what we've learned to your own work.

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## Part 1:

# Advocating to State Legislators During the Budget Season

If you work in the non-profit sector and/or focus on addressing social issues that cover education, economic stability, social and community context, neighborhoods and the built environment, or health and healthcare, you are impacted by budget process decisions each year.

The budget is a yearlong process involving many stakeholders across state government. Listed below is a break down of the budget cycle, running from July 1 through June 30.

### **August:**

- The Office of the Budget and Governor provide instructions and program policy guidelines.
- State agencies prepare requests.

### **October-November 1:**

- Agencies submit budget requests to the Budget Secretary.

### **October-January:**

- The Office of Budget reviews and makes recommendations to the Budget Secretary and Governor.
- The Governor makes final budget decisions to propose to the General Assembly.

**February:**

- The Governor delivers a budget address to the General Assembly.

**February–March:**

- The House and Senate hold appropriations hearings to review each agency's budget request.

**April–May:**

- The House and Senate discuss and determine priorities during budget negotiations.
- The General Assembly works to develop a bill for the budget.
- Both chambers vote on the budget; once the budget passes, it is sent to the Governor.

**By June 30:**

- Once received, the Governor can:
  - sign off on the budget,
  - veto the budget, send it back for negotiations, and continue the process, or
  - not sign the budget, which then passes in 10 days.

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## So what can you do to elevate your cause and ensure it's a budget priority?

- Follow what's happening with the budget:
  - [www.budget.pa.gov](http://www.budget.pa.gov)
  - <http://www.pabudget.com/>
  - <http://www.pahouse.com/HACD/>
  - <https://appropriations.pasenategop.com/>
  - <http://www.pasenate.com/committee/appropriations/>
- Reach out to legislators on the Appropriations Committee and provide them with questions to ask during appropriations hearings. Communicate with the agency that will be questioned as well so they can prepare to make the case for investments.
  - House Appropriations: [bit.ly/pa-house-appropriations](http://bit.ly/pa-house-appropriations)
  - Senate Appropriations: [bit.ly/pa-senate-appropriations](http://bit.ly/pa-senate-appropriations)
- Contact your legislators and ask them to prioritize your interests. Make the information relevant to their district and their constituents. To find your legislator, visit: [bit.ly/find-your-legislator-pa](http://bit.ly/find-your-legislator-pa)
- Mobilize others who care about the issue to act. Who is directly impacted by the budget? Ask them to share how a particular program impacts their life in a positive way.
- Build relationships with legislators and continue the conversation throughout the year. (budget negotiations occur annually)
- Always find a way to thank your legislators at the end of the budget process.

## What does this look like in practice?



A pre-k student joins Trying Together in Harrisburg to thank Representative Ed Gainey for his commitment to high-quality early learning.

Trying Together has successfully advocated for increased investments in early learning programs that impact young children and families. The statewide coalition focuses on three campaigns: Pre-K for PA, Childhood Begins at Home (home visiting), and Start Strong PA (child care). Maintaining partnerships with advocacy organizations across the state and building relationships with legislators are two key factors in our advocacy for critical early learning programs.

Our policy team meets with legislators in 10 southwestern Pennsylvania counties to provide information about how early learning programs impact their district. We also mobilize early learning professionals, encouraging them to engage their legislators by inviting them to tour their child care center, read to the children, and see the benefits of high-quality early learning firsthand.



Senator Camera Bartolotta visiting a child care center in Washington County. After reading to the pre-k class, we facilitated a conversation with the senator, center director, and teachers about the benefits of high-quality early learning.

Throughout the year, we find ways to thank our state policymakers—whether it's through crafts made by children in their district, a social media post of them reading to children during a center visit, or by mobilizing our advocates to email them.

To learn more about how we collaborate with our statewide partners, join us for our Collaboration and Capacity Building session at the 2019 GPNP Summit on December 3, 2019 from 1:30–3:30 p.m. at the Wyndham Grand Hotel in Downtown Pittsburgh.

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## Part 2:

# Submitting Public Comments and Feedback on Regulations

State departments, such as the Pennsylvania Department of Education, often review and make changes to regulations that affect individuals and communities. Typically, when regulations are considered for changes, time is provided for external stakeholders to review and submit public comments.

When the federal education law–*the Every Student Succeeds Act*–was reauthorized, each state was tasked with writing an implementation plan. Prior to submitting their plan to the U.S. Department of Education, the Pennsylvania Department of Education posted a draft online for public comment. Trying Together submitted a response with recommendations on the early learning components of the plan. We harnessed the momentum of the federal law to highlight opportunities for early learning.

Below are the guidelines we developed and follow when crafting public comments:

- **Understand the policy and follow the guidelines:** Begin with a strong understanding of the piece you are commenting on and follow the guidelines for submitting public comment. Ask the agency questions if you need clarification.
- **Organize your document:** Clearly organize the document and provide titles to explain each section.
- **Use evidence to strengthen your comments:** If you are praising a component of the policy, explain how it will positively impact your organization and the people you serve. If you have a critique, offer an evidence-based alternative.
- **Highlight the positive aspects of the policy first. Then offer constructive criticism:** Discuss what you like about the policy before diving into the problems you have with it. Constructive comments will be the most useful and appreciated. Provide rationale.
- **Identify who you are and why this policy matters to you:** Share credentials that distinguish you and/or your organization – include relevant personal and/or professional experiences.

To view our guidelines in practice, review our feedback to the state: [bit.ly/tt-public-feedback](https://bit.ly/tt-public-feedback). A list of resources for stakeholders in the early childhood field is also available: [bit.ly/resource-guide-ESSA](https://bit.ly/resource-guide-ESSA).

Through our advocacy work, we engage professionals in the field and families to strengthen their understanding and knowledge of the policies that impact them.

Trying Together suggests staying up-to-date by following the departments that impact your work and your community on social media. For instance, Trying Together follows the Department of Education, the Department of Human Services, and the Office of Child Development and Early Learning on Facebook and Twitter, in addition to subscribing to their newsletters. It also helps to follow the Governor and legislators who post about opportunities to use your voice.

Whether you are speaking with legislators or writing to a state agency, use your voice to elevate the importance of your community and programs. Collaboration is a key component in pushing for positive change. Join us in sharing your knowledge and passion as an advocate.