



OVERVIEW

With the mandated school budget reviews coming up this summer, it's critical that advocates come together and join the chorus calling on school board members to support a resolution to oppose vouchers for private schools. These budget decisions can negatively impact public education funding and ultimately harm children, families, and communities. With Betsy Devos financially backing vouchers, the push for privatization continues to grow in Michigan.

This toolkit is designed to help advocates, parents, and community members lift their voices at upcoming school board meetings, and reframe the debate as a values-based conversation about how we can work together to support every student.

In this toolkit you'll find:

- [School Boards 101](#)
- [School Board Advocacy Practices](#)
- [Do's and Don'ts](#)
- [School board Messaging Guidance & Talking Points](#)
- [Model Testimony](#)
- [Community & Digital Engagement Tips](#)
- [Relevant Readings](#)

SCHOOL BOARDS 101

What is a school board?

Despite how often the media mentions school boards, information surrounding what a school board is often gets left out of the conversation. These boards are unique to their local school districts and they help determine educational policy and administrative procedures for their specific districts. Typically, they share power with another institution like their local government or the state and

federal departments of education. There are also statewide school boards that are responsible for their jurisdictions districts and boards (find your state school board [here](#)).

Who makes up a school board?

School board sizes vary by district, but most boards consist of anywhere between five to fifteen members. Each board will have a top official who is nominated by the board, or in some cases by their district's voters. Apart from a secretary and treasurer, some school boards will include non-voting student representatives.

Members are elected via the residents of their local school districts, and they serve on a volunteer basis (typically for a fixed term length, such as two- or four-year terms). The amount of time can vary by state, and some states have legal term limits that restrict how long a board member can serve. In some cases, board members can be appointed by mayors, governors, or state superintendents.

What power do school boards actually have? And what is their purpose?

As you begin thinking about writing your testimony and/or attending your local school board meeting, it is helpful to remember the role of school board members so that you can tailor your ask appropriately – and know what to expect. Here are the primary roles of a school board:

- Set the goals and priorities for the district, in collaboration with the Superintendent
- Hire, manage and evaluate the Superintendent
- Approve the budget
- Write, pass and monitor policy
- Approve curriculum recommended by staff
- Engage with constituents

So, you might ask the Board to ensure that they **approve curriculum** that follows state standards and presents a diverse and true understanding of our country's history—both good and bad. Or you might ask that they **support a resolution to oppose vouchers for private schools**. But you would **NOT** want to ask the Board to mandate a specific training, nor hire principals who believe in equity, because Board members should not be involved in the implementation of training or the hiring or firing of any staff except the

Superintendent. **Making your ask relevant to the actual power of the Board will make it more meaningful and more likely to be heard and acted upon.**

When do school board races happen and how often?

Elections are held throughout the year, but most of them are concentrated within May and November. Races will depend on whether or not a school board member is up for reelection that year. To find out when your next school board race is, and who will be up for reelection, visit your local school district's website.

SCHOOL BOARD ADVOCACY PRACTICES

The following advocacy practices provide guidance on leveraging school board meetings to push back against school vouchers and outline tips for a coordinated approach to align the voices of parents, students, and families who value an affirming and supportive education system.

Goals

- **Mobilize** a broad group of your community members to push back on vouchers for private schools by equipping them with accessible language and resources to respond and advocate for an equitable education system.
- **Galvanize** students and families to shift the narrative at the local level and persuade school boards to publicly support a resolution to oppose vouchers for public schools.
- **Build** national awareness of the negative consequences privatizing schools will cause/are causing, AND why a public and inclusive education system is critical for our children and our future.

Best Advocacy Practices

- **Step 1: Organize your community**
 - Find out the date of the next school board meeting, and **call 5 friends and bring them with you. Or gather a meeting with community members to recruit people to join you in pushing back on the voucher resolutions.**

- **Narrow in on your goal and call to action for the next public hearing or meeting**—and understand the power your local school board has in the debate. Is the local conversation about funding, budgeting, hiring/firing, or something else?
- **Encourage** students, parents, and families to share public comments at school board meetings.
- **Step 2: Equip** students, parents, and families as messengers by providing them with tools and resources to serve as advocates for education equity:
 - **Share** this [messaging](#) and [model testimony](#)
 - **Connect** the issue of vouchers to private schools to prevent others from filling in the blanks about what vouchers are.
 - **Reframe** the issue of using taxpayer funds for private schools and center on children by focusing on key values like fairness of education, and the freedom to pursue dreams.
 - **Explain** the critical need to strengthen public schools which will ensure every child has a fair shot at a quality education.
 - **Highlight** the real world harm private school vouchers can have on public schools using supporting research that demonstrates that a strong public education leads to improved behavioral, academic, mental health, and life skills outcomes for all students.
 - **Craft** multiple testimonies that align with the suggested messaging, help bring people’s personal stories to light, and ultimately end with the same or related call-to-action.
 - **Create** fliers, posters, and social media graphics to advocate the points of your speakers using accessible language and information, especially if you are not one of the people speaking at the meeting.
- **Step 3: Present and champion** positive and affirming learning environments at your local school board:
 - **Present testimony** at school board meetings to advance your specific local goal
 - Make sure each person in your group signs up for public comment and shares a [testimony](#). Find out what the process is for speaking during Open Forum, as well as how long you will have to speak – this can usually be found by calling the main district office or looking on the Board’s website.

- Coordinate with students and parents so they can join the school board meeting as well; make sure they sign up for a public comment.
 - If students and parents can't join as speakers, reference their perspectives, and speak to what they or their child needs to be successful in education environments. Encourage them to share and amplify their stories elsewhere (like on social media, or in local news) when possible.
- Close out all questions and statements with a clear “call to action” for your specific school board.
- Have extra materials on hand including model testimony and fliers/posters for folks who show up at the meetings and would like to speak, but are less comfortable with what to say.
- **Step 4: Amplify** what happens at the school board meeting, including parent, student, and family voices:
 - Deploy photographers to capture testimonies of students, parents, and families to capture their emotions and help tell their stories on digital platforms and in the news media.
 - Record testimonies on your mobile device of speakers and share their messages on social media platforms to increase visibility, engage your community, and connect with allies and advocates. Make sure to thank the school board members for their willingness to hear your issues and tag them on social media.
 - Support key voices like students, parents, and family members so they have the access and resources needed to share their stories about ensuring every student has the education they deserve.
 - Connect with grassroots and advocacy organizations in your area that are advocating for equity in public education to continue the conversation. Recap with those who are unable to attend the meeting to get them engaged, and share materials that you have created as well as any next steps that arose from the meeting.
- **Step 5: Follow-up** with each individual board member and ask for a meeting or phone call to discuss the issue 1:1 or with a small group.
 - Not every school board member will take you up on this, but many will, and personal 1:1 conversations are the most effective form of advocacy if you can get one scheduled.

Note: We recognize that **not everyone may feel comfortable and/or safe engaging in their local school board meetings** for a myriad of reasons – to address this we have outlined alternative suggestions for participation below.

- **Create** fliers, posters, and social media posts to amplify the points being made by those who are able to attend a meeting.
- **Craft** your own testimony and ask someone who will be present at the meeting to share your perspective. If there is no one available to share your testimony on your behalf, call your local school district and request an address where you can send your written statement.
- **Schedule** a 1:1 meeting with a school board member to discuss issues that were (or weren't) raised in the meeting. Note: most school board members post their contact information on their school districts website.
- **Find out** if your local school board holds meetings both in-person *and* virtually. If possible, join these meetings remotely to stay up-to-date on what was discussed to better inform what you include when you follow-up (whether that be in a smaller setting or over email).
- **Sign up** for elected board members office hours, if available. These can be both virtual, or at a public place (like a park) in-person in your local community.

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

We've all heard and seen it before. It can be easy to get caught up in the heat of the conversation. To help simplify this messaging guidance, here are some tips on how to talk about educational equity at your local school board meetings.

DO	DON'T
<p>DO start by thanking the Board and acknowledging the difficult work they do on behalf of their constituents, even if you don't agree with them</p>	<p>DON'T start with anger or accusations – that doesn't help leaders receive your message with openness</p>

DO ensure that each speaker has a clearly defined ask for the board	DON'T yell or use attacking language (e.g. refrain from calling someone racist)
DO clearly define the impact, rather than focusing on motives. Share examples of real-world harm, specific to your school district, regarding education funding	DON'T just say funding or resources when describing solutions, which makes people fill in the details on their own
DO appeal to shared values (e.g. the importance of students being able to see themselves and their cultures in the books they read, etc.) and look for common ground in education	DON'T repeat the other side's negative framing to address criticism
DO define restrictive laws in clear terms and don't be afraid to explicitly say racism (e.g. "these laws stop teachers from teaching about racism and inequality")	DON'T use jargon (i.e. avoid formal language and focus on making your point clearly) or zero-sum language (i.e. take money from the wealthiest communities)
DO use messaging that brings in the widest tent (i.e. focus on the benefits for ALL children)	DON'T apologize for elevating, listening to, and advocating for students, particularly students of color
DO speak from your own personal experience and about local examples and local concerns	DON'T use national examples or rhetoric that isn't actually based on the local reality and context

SCHOOL BOARD MESSAGING

This messaging is designed to cut through the noise at school board meetings, avoid hot button language, and help move the debate from a reactionary argument to a values based conversation. The opposition's pernicious "school choice" narrative is making its way through states across the country. To combat this, we need to take back their "freedom" framing. Voters generally agree that private schools shouldn't get taxpayer funds, so our response needs to connect these dots in a values-based way.

We want to

1. Remind school board members of these shared values

2. Help them understand the true stakes of using taxpayer funds for private school vouchers
3. Share why it is critical they continue to support an education system where each student has the opportunity and freedom to pursue their dreams.

This messaging is informed both by the ongoing curriculum debates occurring in school board meetings across America and by the latest research around effectively communicating the importance of learning environments that support every student.

MESSAGING ARCHITECTURE

To address misinformation and shift the narrative, here are the four main elements to focus on. While the exact language for each directive might vary for your context, we explain why each of these steps will help your message:

	Why this works:
Align with shared values of parents:	Shared values start the conversation from a place of agreement, likely making them more interested, particularly if we align with families and invoke patriotism.
Define the impact:	Once you've established shared values - pivot to how private school vouchers (or downstream impacts) undermine those same values. People need to know why this issue matters to them and real life examples help. Clearly outlining the consequences of taking taxpayer funds to pay for private school vouchers helps convey the urgency without exaggerating the problem.
Highlight the benefits of a public education that all children have access to:	Once the harm has been established, pivot to explain how strengthening our public schools DOES support those shared values. Explicitly state the value of education that reflects and affirms all kids by connecting to basic life skills, leadership, the future of our country - or other tangible benefits parents care about.
Call into action for a positive vision:	Finally, leave folks with a clear idea of what the future could look like, with specific calls for funding for our children's futures. A positive vision helps the audience realize what's possible and recognize the role they play to spark change.

SAMPLE MESSAGING

Using the messaging architecture, here are examples of what this might look like.

Start with shared values: Our families, communities, and futures depend on the quality of education we provide for our children.

- Every child is unique, so every school should be funded based on its unique needs.
- No matter their race or the community they live in, children deserve an education that helps them reach their full potential.
- We all want to make sure our children learn the tools they need to succeed. Our families, communities, and futures depend on the next generation.
- Every child, no matter their race or whether they live in an urban, suburban, or rural area, deserves a quality education.

Highlight the need: When we give public schools the funding they need, it strengthens communities, making them better places to live, raise a family, and even start a business.

- For years, some elected leaders have underfunded education, leaving schools from rural areas to major cities with overcrowded classrooms and students forced to learn in unsafe buildings in need of repair.
- Ensuring each child has access to the support they need requires guaranteeing schools are funded based on their students' needs, not their neighborhood.

Provide a vision: Fixing how we fund schools will allow them to provide resources like nutritious meals, mental health support, and career training for the children that need them. This ensures a better future for our children and that we all live in healthy, thriving communities.

- Children should have the freedom to pursue their dreams. We need to strengthen our public schools to ensure every child has a fair shot at a quality education, not let politicians take money from public schools to pay for private school vouchers.
- Every child deserves a quality education that not only teaches them basic skills like reading, writing, and math, but also helps them get the skills needed to get a good job and allows them to realize their full potential.
- A better way is possible - when we provide enough funding to our schools to meet students' unique needs, the results are

clear.

- Real learning can't happen when kids start the day hungry or stressed out about problems at home, so let's make sure students have access to healthy meals and trusted counselors. Children can't form positive relationships with adults in their school if they don't feel safe or welcome, so let's create learning environments that foster social and emotional development.

Call into action for a positive vision: Our children need us now more than ever to ensure they have the opportunity to reach their full potential. That requires us demanding access to a quality education for all, from voting in local elections to holding our elected leaders accountable.

- Transformation is possible when we come together to fix how we fund schools so they can provide every child a quality education.
- Our children can have access to a quality public education, but only when we stop allowing politicians to take money from public schools to pay for private vouchers.
- Each student's needs are different, so let's come together and demand that schools get enough funding to meet those needs.

MODEL TESTIMONY

PARENT How the issue is impacting your role as a parent	
THEME My child, and the children in my school district, deserve a quality education.	Sample Outline 1) Say your name and district affiliation. Thank the Board for their service. 2) State your purpose: "I'm here to [insert one suggestion from below]"
KEY MESSAGES ➤ We need to strengthen our	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Speak about how important it is that all children, regardless of where they live, deserve access to quality education.● Address the negative impacts on children and communities when politicians choose

public schools to ensure every child has a fair shot at a quality education.

- We can't keep letting politicians take money from public schools to pay for private school vouchers.
- Children should have the freedom to pursue their dreams.

BEST PRACTICES

- Speak from personal experience
- Use emotion
- Speak succinctly
- Be confident
- Finish strong with a call to action

to take public school funds and use them for private school vouchers.

- Advocate for your children to have the quality education they deserve.

3) *Share what's happening in your school/community*

4) *Tell them why it matters [suggestions below]*

- Ensuring our public schools have the funding they need will strengthen our communities, make them better places to live, raise a family, and even start a business.
- Parents across the political spectrum, including myself, agree that our taxpayer funds shouldn't be used for private institutions.

5) *Clearly state the action you are asking the board to take: "I ask that you ___"**

- Firmly support a resolution to oppose vouchers for private schools so that every child, no matter their race or the community they live in, receives an education that helps them reach their full potential.
- Set our children up for success. Approve updating instructional materials that feature a broad range of diverse peoples, places, and perspectives. Prioritize training teachers and administrators to ensure they encourage all students to reach their full potential, regardless of race or background.
- Prioritize our children's freedom to reach their full potential.

**Be sure to familiarize yourself with the powers of your particular school board: do they control the budget? Curriculum? Hiring/firing personnel?*

	6) <i>Thank the Board Chair and members for the opportunity to be heard</i>
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COMMUNITY & DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TIPS

When done right, digital and community engagement can help members of a community feel seen and help to uplift the voices of those who may not be the loudest in the room. The tips below will help to give students, parents and community members the tools to support one another as they navigate school board meetings and online spaces.

BUILDING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

By building an online community, students and parents can help broaden their networks with other individuals in their local school districts, especially those they may not interact with on a day-to-day basis. An online space can also serve as a way for quieter members of the community and/or those who are hesitant to get involved to stay up-to-date on what's happening. Having an authentic online group can empower individuals to connect with one another online and also seek out additional engagement opportunities offline, such as meeting in small groups with their school board members.

Here are some actions to consider:

- Create a Facebook group for allies in your local school district
- Invite members to share their own notes from school board meetings
- Encourage members to post ad hoc opportunities to get involved online (e.g. signing a petition) and offline (e.g. making posters and fliers)
- Share aligned social copy and resources with parents and students to create a Twitter storm
- Tag local school board members in Facebook and Twitter posts

- Keep the tone friendly and welcoming

ATTENDING SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

- You won't have a lot of time. Make sure that your message is succinct and powerful.
- Find out what the process is for speaking during Open Forum as well as how long you will have to speak – this can usually be found out by calling the main district office or looking on the Board's website.
- The most powerful public comments are those that are unique and personalized.
- If you are speaking as part of a group, ensure that each person speaks to a different point so that the testimonies don't sound repetitive. This also ensures that you can get multiple points across as a group even though each person only has a few minutes.
- A strong closer is important. Don't just trail off at the end. Time yourself so that you ensure you can get through your closing without being cut off.
- Write down your remarks to ensure a polished presentation.
- Practice your remarks out loud.
- Don't be afraid to show emotion.
- It's not typical for the Board to ask or answer questions during an Open Forum. Be prepared to give your remarks without comment from the Board.
- Be confident, this is your school district and you have every right to be heard.

Relevant readings: This section includes several articles that provide either helpful context to refer to or offer strong examples of the ongoing push to privatize education and the negative impacts.

- [In Her Home State of Michigan, Betsy DeVos is Closer than Ever to Realizing Her Dream of Private School Choice](#) | The74
- [Battleground Michigan: GOP joins with militant far right in campaign against democracy](#) | Salon
- [Was education really the winning wedge issue for the GOP? School board elections tell a different story](#) | The Hill
- [School voucher advocates face opposition as they try to gain momentum](#) | Chalkbeat Detroit
- [Public school advocates launch effort to stop DeVos-backed school scholarship proposal](#) | Michigan Live
- [Opinion | School voucher petition harms Michigan school programs like CTE](#) | Bridge Michigan