

Wayland-Cohocton Central School District

Advocacy Tool Kit

2011 – 2012



Michael Wetherbee
Superintendent
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**OUR PURPOSE:
INFORMING OUR
ELECTED
OFFICIALS SO
THEY CAN
REPRESENT OUR
INTERESTS**

Wayland-Cohocton
Central
School District
2350 Route 63
Wayland, NY 14572
585-728-2211 Phone
585-728-3566 Fax
www.wccsk12.org

A Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Community Advocate,

Thank you for agreeing to learn more about our advocacy efforts. We are excited about your interest in becoming a strong advocate for our school district.

Assemblymen and Senators want to make laws that reflect the knowledge and interests of the people they represent. To do this effectively, they must interact and communicate with individuals who are affected by a particular issue. When this issue is ensuring the survival of our public schools, that individual is YOU. As a teacher, parent, or community member of the education community, Senators and Assemblymen need your insight about how changes in state aid will devastate school districts like ours.

This advocacy toolkit is devoted to helping you become an effective advocate for sound state education policy. The toolkit answers questions about who you should contact, what your message should be, and how you should deliver your message. The toolkit will also address common concerns like, “will they listen to me?” and “will I get in trouble at work for doing this?”

Thank you for your interest in assisting Wayland-Cohocton Central School District with these efforts and for the impact they will have on our district and our students.

Sincerely,

Michael Wetherbee
Superintendent of Schools

District Information

Wayland-Cohocton Central School District
District Office
2350 Route 63
Wayland, New York 14572
District Office Phone Number: 585-728-2211
District Office Fax Number: 585-728-3566

Our Advocacy Resources

Superintendent
Michael Wetherbee
mwetherbee@wccsk12.org

Board of Education President
David Wallace
Dfaw53@stny.rr.com

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Our Vision

The Wayland-Cohocton Central School District will provide its students, regardless of socio-economic status, with a program equivalent to those offered at the finest private and public schools in the nation, while being fiscally responsible to its owners. The program will be defined by data driven decisions, clear goals, and an articulated curriculum which will lead to meaningful and measurable learning for all students. Our program will be built upon a foundation of values, character, honor, and morals. The district will value innovation and flexibility, thus allowing the system to adapt to the needs of our students, while developing the skills and attitudes in our students to adapt to an ever changing environment.

Parents and the community at large will be essential partners in the education of our students. The schools will serve as a center of our communities and evoke strong school and community spirit.

The district will be known for its dedicated and professional staff, who, along with the community, will be strongly invested in our students and our schools. They will be respected and valued, and their accomplishments, and those of our students, will be proudly celebrated. Our students will consistently perform above regional, state, and national averages.

Statement of Purpose

Poor, rural school districts, like Wayland-Cohocton, find themselves fighting for their very existence. While we recognize the financial situation the state finds itself in, we cannot sit idly by and watch districts like ours become devastated by state aid cuts and inaction by our elected officials. While the Governor's Gap Elimination Adjustment reduced our state aid by over \$1,685 per pupil, some wealthy suburban districts were cut by \$500 or less. Additionally, the wealthy suburban districts in our state have expansive programs and strong tax bases, which allow them to generate large amounts of revenue to support their programs.

WE MUST TAKE ACTION OR ACCEPT THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR INACTION. WE MUST REMIND OUR ELECTED OFFICIALS THAT THEY REPRESENT US...THEIR CONSTITUENTS. THEY DO NOT REPRESENT OTHER PORTIONS OF THE STATE, NOR DO THEY SERVE THE LEADERS OF THEIR PARTIES. WE NEED AND EXPECT THEIR SUPPORT.

This advocacy tool kit is designed to help the residents of our community more effectively advocate on our behalf. Advocacy takes many forms. It can take the form of a letter to an elected official, a comment made at a public forum, a letter to the editor, or formal testimony at public hearings. Effective advocates do their homework. They know the issues and plan their communication. Most of all, they give of their time to advance their cause.



It is important for our elected officials to know that our students do not belong to any political party, and quite frankly do not care if our officials are an "R" or a "D." What they care about is receiving a quality education that will prepare them for their future. Thank you for helping to assure that for our students.

Our Advocacy Action Plan

The window of opportunity is actually quite short. The Governor's budget is devastating to our school district. Indeed, our district's aid cut is one of the largest in the state. Our school district is highly state aid dependent, and the Governor's budget reduced our aid by nearly fifteen (15) percent. The impact on our students has been dramatic. We had to eliminate staff, including teachers, reduce athletic programs and increase class sizes. Sadly, these cuts combined only achieved half the savings needed to balance our budget.

To prevent further damage in the upcoming budget year, we need to act now. The following are the public officials who represent our interests in Albany:

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo

New York State Capitol Building
Albany, New York 12224
Phone: (518) 474-8390
Fax: (518) 474-1513

Senator Thomas F. O'mara

Albany Office
Legislative Office Building, Room 812
Albany, New York 12247
Phone: (518) 455-2091
Fax: (518) 426-76

District Office

333 East Water Street
Elmira, New York 14901
Phone: (607) 735-9671
Fax: (607) 735-9675
Email: omara@nysenate.gov

Assembly Member Philip A. Palmesano

District Office
105 E. Steuben Street
Bath, New York 14810
Phone: (607) 776-9691
Fax: (607) 776-5185
Email: palmesano@assembly.state.ny.us

Albany Office

LOB723
Albany, New York 12248
Phone: (518) 455-5791
Fax: (518) 455-4644

Assembly Minority Leader Brian Kolb

Albany Office
Legislative Office Building 933
Albany, New York 12248
Phone: (518) 455-3751
Fax: (518) 455-4650

Email: kolbb@assembly.state.ny.us

District Office

607 W. Washington Street, Suite 2
Geneva, New York 14456
Phone: (315) 781-2030
Fax: (315) 781-1746
Email: bkolb@briankolb.com

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver

Albany Office
Legislative Office Building 932
Albany, New York 12248
Phone: (518) 455-3791

District Office

250 Broadway
Suite 2307
New York, New York 10007
Phone: (212) 312-1420
Email: speaker@assembly.state.ny.us

Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos

Albany Office
Legislative Office Building, Room 907
Albany, New York 12247
Phone: (518) 455-3171
Email: skelos@nysenate.gov

District Office
55 Front Street
Rockville Centre, New York 11570
Phone: (516) 766-8383

ACTION STEP #1

Learn about the Issues that are Impacting Our School District

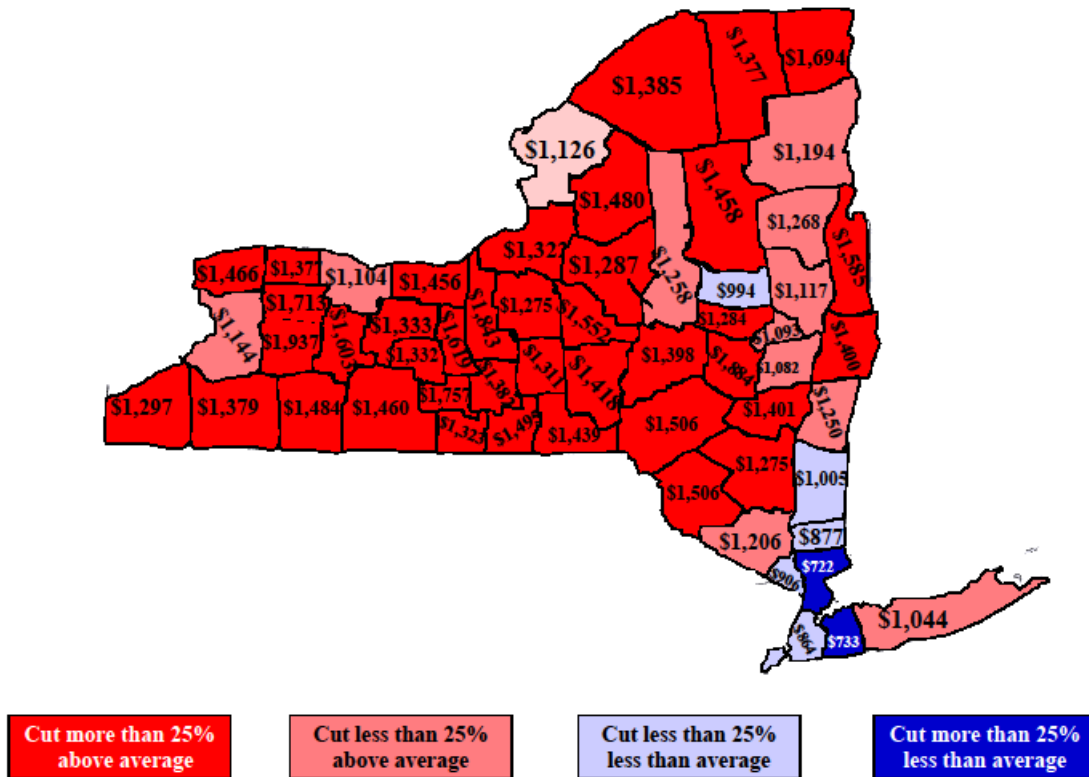
Governor Cuomo enacted a Gap Elimination Adjustment for all school districts in our state. The GEA reduced each school district's aid. While the average reduction in the state is approximately seven percent, most poor rural school districts saw their aid reduced by much higher percentages. Additionally, averages do not tell the real story. Below are the per pupil aid losses of some districts in our state:

2011-2012 Gap Elimination Adjustment per Student

Wayland-Cohocton	\$1685
Dansville	\$1470
Geneseo	\$1437
Avon	\$1364
Livonia	\$1317
Bath	\$1252
Hornell	\$1065
Naples	\$1062
Honeoye Falls	\$ 926
Pittsford	\$ 512
Scarsdale	\$ 192
Floral Park	\$ 529
Bronxville	\$ 227

As the following map of the state shows, Upstate New York is taking the brunt of the Governor's aid cuts. This map shows the average aid cut by county. Please note that the two counties in dark blue are Nassau and Westchester counties. These are two of the wealthiest counties in our state. Their schools offer their students programs beyond our imagination. Many teach foreign languages beginning in kindergarten, offer up to twenty Advanced Placement courses to their high school students, and have extravagant programs in the arts and other elective areas. Their students benefit from gifted and talented programs, planetariums in many of their schools, and extra-curricular programs that we have never had. The counties represented in blue are slated to receive a cut in aid well below the average in the state. This means they did not have to make cuts anywhere close to the magnitude we experienced.

Average Per Pupil Loss in State Aid under the Governor's Proposal – February 2011



In addition to losing this state aid, costs beyond our control are driving our budget upward. Without adding any staff, programs or anything else, our costs will increase by approximately \$1,348,684.

Preliminary estimates indicate the following increases which drive our budget higher:

Description	Cost Increase over Previous Year
Health insurance premiums	\$281,128
Teacher retirement system contribution (mandated by law)	\$189,842
Employee retirement system contribution (mandated by law)	\$85,714
Special education costs (mandated by law)	\$280,000
Negotiated Salary Increases	\$512,000

Health insurance premiums have been increasing by 10-16% annually. One out of every nine dollars in our school budget now goes to pay health insurance premiums. Our district has negotiated concessions from our unions nearly every time we have settled a contract. We have literally saved millions of dollars by negotiating lower cost plans into our contracts, joining a health insurance consortium, and working with our health insurance provider to reduce costs. We hope our state officials can assist us in containing these cost increases. We simply cannot sustain the increases we have experienced over the past ten years.

While the retirement system contributions are mandated by law, we believe our state lawmakers can enact laws that would help mitigate these increases. We recognize the value in maintaining retirement systems that are fully funded, but also realize there are ways to reduce this burden on school districts at this time of vulnerability.

Finally, special education costs are spiraling out of control. We need our lawmakers to help us reduce expenses in this area. Special education costs, over which we have nearly no control, are literally taking available funding away from the rest of our students. We call upon our lawmakers to reduce the mandates that drive up our costs.

ACTION STEP #2

Develop and Test Your Laser Talk

We believe that powerful speaking is the key to being an effective advocate for our schools. Advocates speak powerfully by telling gripping stories, and by giving brief presentations that we call "laser talks".

Let's say you have the chance to speak with a member of our state legislature delegation at a town hall meeting, connect with a busy editorial writer on the telephone, or catch the attention of a friend. Typically, you will only have one or two minutes to get your point across. By using the "laser talk" format, you'll make the most of your opportunity.

Each laser talk has three sections. In the first section, you present a problem you want them to know about. Then you inform them about a solution to the problem. And finally, you call them to action.

P stands for **Problem**
S is for **Solution**, and
A stands for call to **Action**

Let's look at each section in more detail. The first section, identify a problem you want your listener to know about. Try to connect the problem to an issue the listener already cares about. For example, if you are speaking with our Assemblyman, you might let him know you are scared about the type of school district that will remain after we make continued deep cuts. You might say,

"I appreciate the support you have always given the schools in our community, but I am terrified of what will be left of them if the Gap Elimination Adjustment remains the same. I understand our Board of Education was forced to cut our athletic program, eliminate staff including teachers and increase class sizes. And, those cuts did not close the budget gap."

Next, inform the listener about a solution to the problem you just presented. Give examples of how the solution would work and why it would be effective. You might cite a recent study, or use other credible statistics. Here's an example:

"Our district lost over \$1,685 per pupil in school aid, while some of the wealthiest school districts in the state lost less than \$500 per pupil. These cuts if continued devastate our schools."

The final section of the laser talk is the Call to Action. Calls to Action should be concrete, specific, and formed as a Yes/No question. An example is the following request you might make of our State Senator:

"A number of state organizations have called for very specific mandate relief That would help schools deal with this year's budget. Would you sponsor legislation to make such mandate relief a reality?"

Before you give a laser talk, it's a good idea to practice it. Say it out loud to yourself, and then to another person until you feel comfortable with it. Soon you'll be able to make the talk your own, using different sections as you need them, and adapting them to different situations. Learning a good repertoire of laser talks to use when the time is right will help make you a powerful advocate.

We have included a laser talk organizer for your use on the following page. Feel free to duplicate this if you plan to create more than one laser talk for advocacy purposes. We have also included the format on the school district website.

We also recognize the value of compelling stories. Good storytelling captivates all of us. As we listen to a good story, our common humanity is touched, and we have the potential to be changed.

For instance, consider the following passage:

"I grew up and attended high school on Long Island. My school district had a planetarium with a full time planetarium director, offered six different languages at the high school level, and provided more than one hundred elective classes to its high school students. Students I graduated with attended Ivy League colleges. Today, one writes for The New York Times, one served four terms in Congress, and one is the most decorated cabaret star in New York City. Quite frankly, I had opportunities that my children will never have here. Yet, the students in our school compete with the students from my high school for the same slots in college. We can't allow the opportunity gap to grow even wider. The economic health of Upstate New York is dependent on this."

Stories take something that's abstract and impersonal, like a statistic, and turn it into something very intimate and emotional. A good story softens the listener and appeals to their humanity in a way that facts alone cannot.

We use compelling stories to illustrate both the problems with inequitable school aid and solutions to remedy them. Stories can be memorized, like we do with laser talks. Or, if they're longer, we can read them to our audience. Either way, it's important to present stories in a natural style so their power shines through.

We are convinced that sharp laser talks and compelling stories about real people can change hearts and minds, and ultimately, help bring about changes we need in Albany.

ACTION STEP #3

Write a Letter or email Your Assemblyman, Senator, and Governor

It's your right to communicate your opinions and knowledge to the people who have been elected to represent you in our state government. These people rely on their constituents to inform them of issues affecting their communities. They want to know what is important to you, and they value your input. Our elected officials often report that they do not hear much from those represented on many issues. Your advocacy is not just permissible, it's appreciated.

You already know the issues that our school is facing, and you have practiced your main talking points. Now, it's time to communicate the message in writing.

Some forms of written communication are more impactful than others. While e-mails and form letters are fine, personal letters (perhaps even hand written) convey a stronger message. It shows you went out of your way to make known your concerns.

Writing a letter and making a follow-up phone call only takes a few minutes of your time, but it ensures that your representatives know how you want to be represented. When writing a letter, you should include the same points that you refined in your laser talk, including a *statement of the problem*, a *proposed solution*, and the *call to action*. It is best to keep the letters short. Our elected officials are busy people, and a letter that gets right to the point is more likely to be remembered.

Letters to your elected officials should include the following parts:

Introduction

Example:

As a resident of the Wayland-Cohocton Central School District, and the legislative district you represent, I am writing to request your support for our school district in these trying financial times.

Statement of Problem

Example:

The Governor's Gap Elimination Adjustment stripped our school district of \$1,685 per student in state aid. This loss of state revenue caused our school district to eliminate staff including teachers, reduce our athletic programs and increase class sizes. And sadly, even after doing all of that, more will be needed to be cut. We will be left with a school district in which no parent would want their child educated.

Proposed Solution

Example:

There is one easy solution. Instead of taking varying and inequitable amounts of state aid from each school district, the state should reduce each district \$1,019 per pupil, as this is the state average per pupil. Thus, the state will realize the full amount of savings and each district will lose the same amount of funding per pupil. This is the only way to make the cuts have the same effect on each district.

Information about the Proposed Solution

Example:

The Governor's proposed budget disproportionately hurts poor rural school districts. Our district is slated to lose 60.5% more than the average amount in the state. Yet, wealthy suburban districts, such as Pittsford and Scarsdale would lose 45.6% and 79.7% less than the average aid loss, respectively. Those districts have much more expansive programming than our district and a greater ability to generate revenue through a modest tax increase. While the proposed cut would be devastating to our students, their students would barely notice the cut.

Call to Action

Example:

Will you work on behalf of the poor, rural schools you represent to ensure a more equal reduction in state aid?

Conclusion, Signature and Contact Information

Example:

A map showing the impact of the Governor's proposal is attached to this letter. I would be glad to provide more data to you if it would be helpful. Without your help, our school district, and others like ours, will be devastated. I strongly urge you to stand up for our children.

Sincerely,

Be sure to include all of your contact information so your representative can reply to you.

When your letter is completed, your letter should look something like the example on the following page.

Sample Letter

Date

Assemblyman/ Senator _____
Legislative Office Building _____
Albany, NY 12248

Dear Assemblyman/Senator _____ :

As a resident of the Wayland-Cohocton Central School District, I write today to beg your support of our school district. While I realize the dire financial position of the state, the Governor's Gap Elimination Adjustment has drastically impacted my school district.

The Governor's cuts have caused our school district, which is highly dependent on state aid, to lose \$1,685 per pupil. Simultaneously, his budget has the Pittsford Central School District lose at only \$512 per student, and the Scarsdale schools only \$192 per pupil. Those school districts have much more expansive programs than do we, and such minimal cuts to their school district had little impact upon their students. Conversely, our students lost some of their athletic programs, have increased class sizes and countless teachers and support staff.

There is a simple solution to this. The average cut in the state is slated to be \$1,019. Instead of cutting our poor rural districts so drastically, the state should take \$1,019 per student in state aid from each district. The state would extract the identical savings to the current proposal and each district would lose the identical amount per pupil. This distribution of cuts would be much fairer.

As a parent of three children, I am scared. I am scared to think of what will become of the community in which I have purchased a home. And, I am scared to imagine the quality of the education my children will receive if the Governor's cuts continue. Will you vow to only support a state budget that makes the aid cuts equal across the state? Our children, and our upstate economy, need your support on this.

I have attached a map that shows how inequitable the Governor's cuts are. I would be glad to provide you with further information if it would be helpful. I beg you to represent our children. Please work with your upstate colleagues, regardless of party affiliation, to ensure our upstate schools are not devastated.

Sincerely,

Address
Phone

ACTION STEP # 4

DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE AIDES IN YOUR ASSEMBLYMAN AND SENATOR'S OFFICE

People are surprised to learn that the often young aides in our elected officials' offices have so much influence on them. Indeed, all elected officials rely heavily upon the advice and counsel of their staff members. Their aides work tirelessly to collect and filter the large amounts of information and requests that bombard their offices. Good advocates know and understand this and work to build great relationships with these staff members.

Here are some suggestions for building and maintaining strong relationships with the staff members in your Assemblyman's and Senator's office:

1. Learn about your Assemblyman and Senator. It is easy to be intimidated by those who serve in elected office, but remember they are real people too. A Google search of them will tell you a lot about them. Learn their passions, interests, background, and aspirations. Doing so will allow you to converse more easily with them and their aides. It may also reduce your apprehension in reaching out to them.
2. Call or visit your representative's local office. Your first conversation might sound like the following:
 - Introduce yourself.
 - Ask if the aid has a few minutes to speak with you.
 - Let them know you are a resident of the school district and a constituent of the Senator or Assemblyman, and let them know you are concerned about the impact of the state budget on our schools.
 - Thank the aide for the work they do for the Assemblyman or Senator, and let them know you hope what you have to share with them will be helpful in assisting them to better represent his/her district.
 - Deliver your laser talk.
 - Ask if you can send additional information.
 - Let them know you will check back in a week to see how the elected official responded.
 - Thank them for their time.
3. Send a quick thank you note to the staff member letting them know you appreciated the time they took to listen to your concerns. This can be a card, note or e-mail. Again, remind them you will check back with them in a week.
4. If when you check back they tell you the Senator or Assemblyman will help, be sure to use good positive reinforcement. A little bit of chocolate, some homemade cookies, or even a nice thank you note will go a long way! They will remember your appreciation the next time you call them.

Get the attention of a good aide, and you've got the ear of the Senator or Assemblyman.

ACTION STEP #5

MEET WITH YOUR ASSEMBLYMAN OR SENATOR

If at all possible, meet with your Assemblyman or Senator. Each week during the budget season Albany has a "Tin Cup Tuesday." That is the day our elected officials set aside in the Albany offices for lobbying groups and interested taxpayers to make their case. Here are the easy steps to an effective visit to Albany:

- Schedule a meeting
- Prepare for the meeting
- Participate in the meeting
- Follow up.

SCHEDULE A MEETING

1. Plan what you are going to say when you call the Albany Office. Having a script or outline is always helpful and will make you feel more comfortable. Here is an example of a possible script:
 - Hello, my name is_____.
 - I am a (parent, resident, teacher, etc) in the Wayland-Cohocton Central School District.
 - I would like to meet with Senator/ Assemblyman_____to discuss the distribution of school aid or mandate relief or.....
 - Is there a time that we might be able to meet? Or, I plan to be in Albany on _____ , would it be possible to meet sometime that day?
2. Call your Assemblyman or Senator's office. The phone numbers are included in this tool kit.
3. Ask to speak with the person who manages the calendar. If that person is unavailable or tells you they will have to get back to you, call back the next day. **Keep calling until you get your meeting scheduled.**
4. When you speak to the person who handles the Assemblyman's or Senator's calendar, ask to have a face-to-face meeting with your elected representative. Follow the bulleted information contained in section number ONE (1) above.
5. Thank the staff member for scheduling the meeting and let him or her know you will confirm the meeting by phone a few days prior to the meeting. Congratulations! Sometimes getting the meeting is the hardest part of the process.

PREPARE FOR THE MEETING

Prior to the meeting, there are several things you can do to ensure that your meeting goes smoothly:

1. A few days prior to your trip to Albany, you should call the office to confirm your meeting.
2. Create an agenda for the meeting. Regardless of whether you are going alone or with a group, you should plan out what is going to be said, by whom, and in what order. The agenda is just for you and your team, if others are going with you. It is not to be distributed to the office staff or left with the representative. Remember, this is *your* meeting. You want to control it and be sure that your messages are conveyed.

Your meeting should generally follow this format:

Introductions and Acknowledgements

- ✓ Each participant says who they are and what they do in the community (parent, resident, student, teacher, etc.)
- ✓ Acknowledge the public service of the representative and past actions on behalf of our school district.
- ✓ Let them know why you are in Albany and the issue you plan to discuss.

Laser Talk

- ✓ State the Problem
- ✓ Provide the Solution
- ✓ Call for Action

Closing

- ✓ Answer any questions
- ✓ Set a specific timeline for follow up
- ✓ Provide any "leave-behind" material
- ✓ Thank them for his/her time

If you are with a group of people, assign roles for the meeting. Choose a secretary and meeting manager.

- ❖ The secretary takes notes during the meeting and records any questions, objections, promises or concerns expressed by the elected official during the meeting. The secretary is also responsible for following up with a thank you note after the meeting.
- ❖ The meeting manager facilitates the conversation, provides the opening and closing statements and works to keep the conversation on task and focused.

If you are meeting alone, you obviously have to play both roles. If so, inspire yourself. Know that you may be making an incredible difference in the lives of children by holding this meeting.

THE MEETING

Here are a few points to consider as you prepare to meet with your Assemblyman or Senator, or their aide:

- ❑ Try to arrive a little bit early. The Legislative Office Building is quite large and it can be difficult to find your way if you are not familiar with it. Leave yourself enough time to find parking, go through security, and find your way to the office.
- ❑ Be concise. These folks will be working on a very tight schedule. You want them to remember every word you say. Stick to your message. If you have not been told how long the meeting will be, you can assume they have allocated 15 minutes for you. And, don't be surprised if your representative is late or can't attend due to pressing business in Albany. If so, meet with his or her aide and convey the same message.
- ❑ The offices are often small and crowded during visitation days. Be prepared to have to stand while waiting.
- ❑ Try your best to connect on a human level. A bit of humor goes a long way. Remember, on these days of visitation, everyone is making demands. Niceness goes a long way.
- ❑ Be passionate, not emotional. Emotional pleas make others in the room uncomfortable.
- ❑ Be prepared to summarize arguments to the issue. Be sure you understand their opposition, and have talking points prepared to combat them.
- ❑ Make the issue personal. Speak of children....your children, if applicable.
- ❑ Say "thank you." Surprisingly, our elected officials hear "thank you" less often than you would imagine. Be sure to thank the staff when leaving the office, too.

FOLLOWING UP

After the meeting, follow up with the person with whom you met. Your actions after the meeting demonstrate the importance of the topic to you and can keep the legislator's attention focused on the issue.

It would be good to send a note or e-mail after the visitation that reiterates your points, and your *Call to Action*.

This advocacy guide has been prepared for those interested in the future health of the Wayland-Cohocton Central School District. We express our gratitude to Learning Forward, whose advocacy guide provided the foundation for this work.