

Building Community Support

Beyond completing the necessary outreach to other parents of French Second Language (FSL) students, when advocating for a cause it is important to do everything you can in order to build community support. Community support means support from the public at large as well as community leaders such as City Councilors, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Members of Parliament (MPs) and leaders of local community organizations. Some individuals will already be supportive of your cause, whereas others will require persuasion. Try and reach as many people as possible, beginning with those you suspect are already supportive.

1. Bringing people over to your side – the art of persuasion

One of the most intimidating things to do is to talk to a stranger about something you believe in. When discussing an issue and selling your point of view, there are some simple things you can keep in mind.

- **Be open** and listen.
- **Maybe doesn't always mean no** – if they ask you to follow up, follow up until you get a concrete answer. No matter what the answer is, remember that if they are an elected representative, you can hold them to account during the next election.
- **Approach strangers to sign your petition** – difficult task, but gets easier each time. Everyone gets nervous. If you have a new volunteer who is reluctant, suggest to them that they go out with a buddy. More than likely, their fear comes from someone asking them questions they don't know the answer to. Buddying up with someone more experienced alleviates this fear.
- **It's okay to not know the answer** – just be sure to follow up with an individual.
- If meeting with someone to discuss an issue, **come prepared and take notes!**
- **Being Assertive is okay**, being Aggressive is not.
- **Never be caught empty-handed** – keep specific materials on hand at all times, such as a leaflet and a membership form.

2. Drumming up Public Support

Petition Drive -- The real purpose, dos and don'ts. Is there a format to follow?

- **DO:** fill in the first line and remember to build media support in order to reach those individuals you cannot reach personally.
- **Circulate a petition.** A petition has a dual purpose. First, to make the school board aware that there are a number of parents and community members (ie, voters) who care about this issue; and second, it spreads awareness of the issue in the community by allowing you to approach people and talk to them one on one. In addition to this, leaving the petition in high traffic areas, such as the school office and local coffee shops will give your cause good exposure.
- **Get your children involved.** Children enrolled in LFI are old enough to help persuade school trustees and defend their education. Have them partake in a letter writing campaign. Children can talk about what the LFI program means for them. If possible, it may also be appropriate to find an older student or graduate who enrolled in the LFI program and have them send along their endorsement of the program, outlining what it has done for them.

Information Tables -- Attend and present at district parent information nights. Be sure to bring lots of information about the benefits of a second language. Set up an information table (and volunteers to help you) at local events, festivals etc. (target children's events where parents will likely be in attendance).

Community Events -- Organize bilingual community events (i.e. Charlotte Diamond, performers, etc).

3. Bringing Community Leaders onto Your Side

- **Build political pressure by collecting community endorsements.** Reach out to community leaders and respected members of the community and ask them to send a letter to the school board or to the local newspaper. Collecting letters of endorsement for your cause will also give you something with a little weight to bring to future school board meetings. You may be asked to give supporters a sample endorsement letter so they know what to write. It's also a good idea to give out a CPF Fact Sheet so the endorser has a backgrounder on what they are supporting. Some people to reach out to include:
 - The local MLA (Find them here: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/mla/3-1-1.htm>)
 - The local MP (Find them here: www.parl.gc.ca)
 - The local Board of Trade and City Council (These bodies have a vested interest in French Immersion programming, as it attracts people to the community and is seen as a positive factor in terms of quality of life.)
 - Supportive teachers at the school
 - Local 'celebrities'
- **How to approach politicians MP, MLA, etc.** -- Many people feel intimidated, especially if they believe that their representative may not be supportive or may be reluctant to take a side. There are some very simple ways you can be

effective when speaking to your local politician. And remember – Don't be nervous! It's this person's job to talk to members of the community, just like you.

- **Never come empty-handed** to a meeting. Be sure to leave them with materials that will serve as a reminder for them to do this.
- **Give them a good amount of time** to write an endorsement, and don't be afraid to call and remind them. Remember, these are very busy people, and they more than likely have staff that will help them when they get swamped...
- **Be sure to book meetings** with officials as far **in advance** as possible. Many elected reps have to travel to the provincial or national capitol each week and therefore their limited meeting time books up fast. Also, if you are told that the representative is too busy and offered to meet with a staff person instead, try your best to tell them that you would rather a meeting with the rep. Meetings with staff reps are generally very limited in what they can accomplish, as most decisions and action items need to be approved by the rep anyway.
- If the elected representative's party or slate appears to have a stance that is contradictory to what you are trying to accomplish, do not allow this to scare you off. Still **approach them and talk to them**. You may be surprised by what they are willing to do for you, and at the very least, the concern will register with them and may plant the seed for a policy change within the organization.
- **Attend the meeting knowing what it is that you want**. This will give the meeting some direction. Do you want a letter of support? Do you want them to address the audience at an event you are hosting?
- If you want the individual to sign a letter of support, be sure to **bring in a sample** one as well as a fact sheet in case the elected rep needs it
- Try not to politicize the meeting or get side-tracked by discussing partisan politics – **you are speaking to this person as YOUR elected representative**. This individual is the only voice you have in government and is one of the most influential voices in your community.

4. Tactics for showcasing the community support you have garnered

- Can you be strategic in order to give the illusion or to demonstrate momentum of your campaign? **Be sure you can get media attention when you reach a milestone** (petition signatures, support of a VIP)
- **Present letters of support** to the media and to the board you are lobbying
- Refer to Advocacy Toolkit documents that cover **lobbying a school board** and the **media guide** for more ideas.