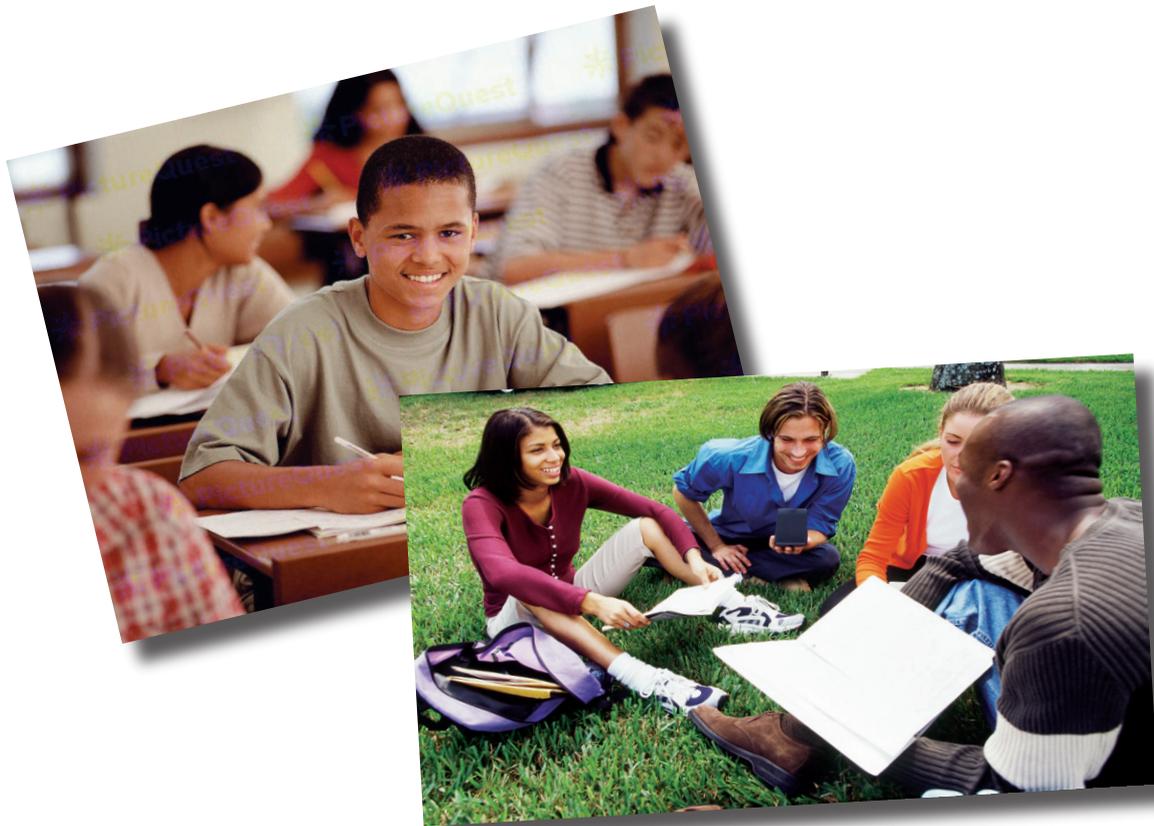


Reaching School Board Members

A Guide for Creating a Clear, Concise, and Compelling Nutrition Policy Campaign



SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS
Through Healthy Food Policies

ACT NOW FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE



PROJECT LEAN
LEADERS ENCOURAGING
ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION

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Introduction

Since 1997, California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) (CPL) has worked to improve the nutrition and physical activity environment in California high schools. CPL's original work centered on empowering high school students to identify and ask for changes in the types of food and activities offered on their campuses. CPL staff quickly realized that the students needed the support of their district's school board in order to make wide-scale, long-term changes. To accomplish this, CPL, in partnership with the California School Boards Association, developed several educational pieces for school board members, including nutrition policy articles, fact sheets, and a *Healthy Food Policy Resource Guide*.

"Reaching School Board Members" utilizes multiple hours of feedback and discussion with California school board members, superintendents, school principals, and parents to help community groups create "win-win" situations with school board members. This workbook will help readers convey their nutrition policy message effectively and at the same time help school board members gain the information they need to create effective nutrition policies.

Why Worry About the Type of Food Sold at School?

American youth are increasingly faced with nutrition-related health problems that used to be confined to adulthood; most notably obesity, type 2 diabetes, high blood cholesterol levels, and high blood pressure. Diseases most commonly seen in adulthood such as cancer, heart disease, and osteoporosis, can be affected by the eating behaviors people practice as children.

Although the causes for these conditions are multi-faceted, what and where children eat are central to the issue. Schools account for over a third of the meals eaten by adolescents outside the home. Much of the food in schools, excluding United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimbursable meals, is purchased in vending machines, school stores, snack bars, and a la carte lines. These foods are typically higher in added sugar, sodium, and fat than USDA reimbursable school breakfast and lunch meals.

Poor diet has been found to negatively influence the ability to learn through decreased motivation and attentiveness. Research shows that healthy, well-nourished children are more prepared to learn, more likely to attend school and class, and better able to take advantage of educational opportunities. Recent studies demonstrate:

- Undernourishment impacts the behavior of children, their school performance, and their ability to concentrate and perform complex tasks. ¹
- Iron deficiency is one of the most prevalent nutritional problems of children in the United States. Iron deficiency can increase fatigue, shorten attention span, decrease work capacity, reduce resistance to infection, and impair intellectual performance. Consequently, anemic children tend to do poorly on vocabulary, reading, and other tests. ²

- Children who suffer from poor nutrition during the brain's most formative years score much lower on tests of vocabulary, reading comprehension, arithmetic, and general knowledge. ³
- Even moderate under-nutrition (inadequate or sub-optimal nutrient intake) can have lasting effects and compromise cognitive development and school performance. ⁴
- Morning fasting has a negative effect on cognitive performance, even among healthy, well-nourished children. A test of the speed and accuracy of response on problem-solving tasks given to children who did or did not eat breakfast found that skipping breakfast had an adverse influence on their performance on the tests. ⁵

Such findings indicate that young people will not be ready to learn and achieve at their full potential unless they are well nourished and healthy. Future health and current academic performance are impacted by food choices at school. It is important that all food choices at school nurture student health and academic performance.

Why Involve School Board Members in Nutrition Policy?

School board members care about children and want them to grow into healthy, productive citizens. As the ultimate decision-making body within a district, the school board has the opportunity to influence children's health. School boards often examine problems or opportunities within a district, request information to understand possible solutions, debate potential solutions, and ultimately, craft policies that implement solutions. Nutrition presents just such an opportunity. From exclusive beverage contracts and the construction of kitchen facilities to the length of the lunch period and the

parameters for fund-raising, school boards have an important role to play in setting nutrition policy. District-wide nutrition policies have the potential to positively influence the eating behavior of all children in the district.

Are School Board Members Interested in Nutrition Policy?

Most school board members are extremely busy considering a wide range of issues that affect students. CPL's research with California school board members indicates that nutrition is not always the highest priority for them.

California school board members said that they see the following barriers to enacting nutrition policies.⁶⁻⁹

KEY BARRIERS

- Nutrition is not a priority for school district personnel, parents, and community members.
- School board members feel inadequately prepared to develop nutrition policies.
- Budget considerations seem large. School boards worry about the perceived cost of offering healthy foods, and/or about the loss of revenue from eliminating the sale of soda, candy, and other unhealthy foods.

However, California school board members also said that they see the following benefits to enacting nutrition policies.

KEY BENEFITS

- There is a link between nutrition and academic achievement.
- There is a link between nutrition and improved attendance.
- There are practical benefits to students, both short term (feeling better) and long term (a potential decrease in the risk of obesity, cancer,

and other chronic diseases).

Because there are many barriers and benefits, you will need a clear, concise, and compelling approach to involving school board members in nutrition policy.

How Do I Develop a Clear, Concise, and Compelling Approach?

There are two main steps to success:

1. Identify your local nutrition policy priorities.
2. Develop and implement an action plan for involving school board members.

Each of these steps involves many important activities that are discussed in the following sections.

Step 1. Identify Your Local Nutrition Policy Priorities.

Increasingly, there are many tools available that can assist you in setting nutrition policy priorities. These include:

- School Health Index
www.cdc.gov
- Changing the Scene
www.fns.usda.gov
- Fit, Healthy, Ready to Learn
www.nasbe.org
- Playing the Policy Game
www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org
- Healthy Food Policy Resource Guide
www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org

Due to the frequency of web site architectural changes, please utilize each site's search engine to locate these documents.

Regardless of which tool you use, five aspects are key when determining nutrition priorities.

First, build a diverse work group that includes individuals who represent different points of view. Members should include but not be limited to students, school staff and administrators, school food service, school nurses, parents, local health department staff, physicians, registered dietitians, and community leaders. School board members may or may not be a part of the work group depending on their level of interest and availability.

Second, utilize the work group to complete an assessment of current school district nutrition policies and practices. Find out what is happening and why it is happening. The diversity of your work group will help to assure that all sides of an issue are taken into account and that information is gathered from many sources.

Third, set clear policy goals that will serve as a call to action for school board members. Although there may be 20 policies you may like to see changed, it will be easier and less overwhelming for the school board to address the work group's three to five top policy recommendations. These recommendations should be determined through a group consensus process. The recommendations will hold greater weight if you can demonstrate that the diverse opinions of work group members were considered and utilized to arrive at the priorities. School boards look for consensus and they are often wary of opinions they think are only held by a few.

Fourth, produce a document that concisely describes what the work group found during the assessment process, what it would like to see happen in the future, and why it is important that the school board consider the work group's vision. The document should focus on areas of strength within the district as well as areas for improvement.

Finally, tie your local policy message to the idea that nutrition programs increase student performance, attendance, and well-being. School board members can improve the lives of countless students in their district by strengthening nutrition policies. CPL uses the slogan, "Successful Students through Healthy Food Policies: Act Now for Academic Excellence," to express this idea. This slogan, coupled with your local policy goals, is one way to create a message that catches the attention of board members.

Step 2. **Develop and Implement an Action Plan for Involving School Board Members.**

This step involves many strategic activities. Because school board members are busy and do not always see nutrition policy as a priority, it is important to find effective ways to communicate and partner with them. The key concept here is "relationship-building."

A. Discover School Board Member Interests and Meet Their Needs.

School board members utilize a wide range of experiences to examine policy situations and to decide how to act. In order to be effective at sharing your policy priorities, it is important to learn more about the school board members as well as the district superintendent.

Essential information includes:

- Each member's name and the part of the community in which they reside.
- Each member's occupation.
- Each member's special interests and/or key focus areas.
- The key issues, especially health-related ones, facing the board, and where each member stands on the issue.



- Discovering if any members have an interest in chronic disease—sometimes a family experience with cancer, diabetes, or heart disease will give a member a unique interest in health promotion.
- Each member's concerns with your policy recommendation.
- Each member's interests in your policy recommendation.
- Discovering if any member will serve as an advocate for you.

You can learn this information by:

- Visiting the school district's web site. Many sites contain biographies on school board members.
- Meeting with community advocates who have worked on school board issues and/or helped elect school board members.
- Meeting with former school board members. They can often give you insight into the inner workings of the school board.
- Meeting with the school board members themselves. Although very busy, members often like to meet with community members, particularly if they are constituents. You also can consider having youth conduct the interviews. Board members often are very receptive to youth and the interview process can help students gain valuable skills.
- During election time, school board members may participate in candidate forums. This is a good time to ask candidates publicly where they stand on school nutrition issues. Then remind them of their position after they are elected.
- Following the local media's coverage of local school issues.

instance, you may learn that a member has diabetes and has a special interest in the rising number of children in the district who have type 2 diabetes. This member might be a strong partner when advocating for nutrition policies. You might also learn that one of the members is a strong advocate of the district athletic program. This member might have a strong concern with changing the fund-raising practices that generate money for the athletic program. You may need to make a special effort to calm the fears of this member. The more you know about board members before you present your policy recommendations, the more successful you will be in gaining their cooperation.

Always link the nutrition policy message to the priority issues in the district. Academic achievement can be a politically-charged challenge for school boards. Make sure to highlight the research that links healthy eating to academic achievement and improved attendance. Also be aware that as school nutrition is covered more and more in the media and in school board association publications, board members may develop a greater interest in understanding the nutrition issues in their district. This is an excellent opportunity for you.

Describe how you will learn about the backgrounds of the school board members you want to educate. How will you find out about their interests, concerns, and willingness to serve as advocates for your policy recommendation? Complete a worksheet for each board member.

Worksheet A can be found on page 14.

The information you learn will help create a nutrition policy message that meets the interest and needs of school board members. For

B. Recruit Partners to Help You.

School board members look to many different types of people for input on policy issues. Your partners should meet this need. Your partners should help address the interests and concerns of the board members. For example, if there is a board member who is concerned with fundraising revenue, you will want a partner who can help address or speak to that concern. By enlisting the help of these individuals, you will present a stronger case for your policy priorities. The key is to utilize a variety of people with different backgrounds, because each brings different skills and perspectives. School board members have told CPL that they consider the following groups to be influential: ⁶⁻⁹

- An interested school board member who can act as a “champion” for your issue. You may identify such a person while learning about school board members.
- Professionals from the health care field, especially doctors, nurses, and registered dietitians.
- Staff from the school system, such as:
 - Superintendent
 - School food service staff
 - Administrators
 - Teachers (especially health, home economics, physical education, and science).
- Parent/caregiver groups such as PTA/PTO (especially from elementary schools because parents tend to be more active when children are in those grades. Even if you are focusing on secondary school issues, elementary school parents still have a stake in what happens in the district. Remember that elementary school students quickly become secondary school students!)
- Community professionals with marketing experience.
- Representatives of the community such as

Parks and Recreation, Rotary Club, Kiwanis, Lions Club, Junior League, and faith organizations.

- The American Cancer Society (ACS). ACS has a national commitment to the development of School Health Councils. Local ACS chapters have materials, and possibly staff and volunteers available to assist in creating community dialog about school health issues. *Source: American Cancer Society (2002)*
- Local health organizations like the health department, or a local hospital or clinic.
- Students...Don't forget the students—they have one of the most powerful voices!

There are many ways to recruit these partners. The most effective way is through a personal invitation. Common ways to identify potential partners include attending and/or presenting at community coalition meetings, and asking other colleagues for partner recommendations. Seek people who are active in various school-related issues, including the political-related ones such as school board elections and school bonds. If they have an interest in schools, they may have an interest in your issue.

Also try more indirect methods such as:

- Posting fact sheets and notices in laundromats, grocery stores, schools, university student unions, recreation centers, performing art centers, post offices, drug stores, doctor's offices, and libraries.
- Attending an open house at school and talking to parents.
- Distributing flyers or door hangers.
- Printing an article in the local newspaper or parent newsletter about school nutrition.

Worksheet B can be found on page 15.



C. Educate School Board Members.

You have four main goals when educating school board members:

- Explain to them why nutrition policy is important to student learning and health in their district.
- Convey the policy actions that your work group feels will improve the district.
- Address board members' interests and concerns related to your policy.
- Discover additional actions, in addition to the ones you suggest, that the school board would like to take on nutrition policy.

These goals can be accomplished through several communication techniques.

- Be brief and straight to the point.
- Use a respectful, yet authoritative, well-informed tone.
- Convey the fact that you are a nutrition policy expert. You may not see yourself as an expert, but remember, you are an expert in your policy recommendations and why they are important.
- Use what you know about school board members' interests and concerns to frame your education message and approach.

School board members told CPL that they like to receive information through multiple avenues, including E-mail, presentations at school board meetings, the media, and school board task forces.⁶ Remember that school board members need to hear the policy message from different influential people. Not every communication should come from you! Different partners should help you address the various interests and concerns of school board members.

E-mail

One of the best ways to communicate with board members is through E-mail. Keep your

messages short. Use E-mail to provide updates on your work group and to provide internet links to credible nutrition and policy information. Often school board members' E-mail addresses are posted on the school district web site or are available by calling the district office.

Presentations

School board presentations can be an effective way to educate members, especially if you get a designated time on the meeting agenda. In general, there are two ways in which the public can make a presentation to the school board:

1. The best option is to have a board member or the superintendent place your item on the agenda as an action item. This can be difficult to achieve because school boards are so busy. It will, however, give you time to make a longer presentation. Board members will be more prepared to consider your issue if they see it on the agenda as an action item and they can actually take action on it. If your issue is placed on the agenda as a discussion item, members may just listen politely, have a brief discussion and then move on to another issue.
2. Utilize the public comment time. Speakers usually sign-in at the beginning of the meeting and then will be given a very short period of time (usually three minutes) to address the board. Because of the short duration, this is not always the best way to convey your message. However, you can maximize this opportunity by having your partners sign-in for speaking times as well. Each partner should use their three-minutes to speak on a unique aspect of your message, such as the link between nutrition and learning, children's health statistics, and your policy request. For example, one partner describes health implications, another describes your assessment results, and another describes your policy recommendations. A visit to your school district's web site will help you find out

specifically how presentations work in your district. The web site should indicate when and where the meetings occur as well as the process for speaking during the public comment time. The site may also advise you on the process for requesting a presentation to the board, apart from the public comment time.

Media

School board members utilize the local media to understand what issues and opinions are present in their community. Utilize the media to educate board members about your issue.

A word of caution, though. Because the media is very public, you need to think very carefully about the tone and potential ramifications of your message. For example, a critical letter to the editor may make the school board hostile to your message. Similarly, a reporter may be invited to a school to cover a positive nutrition change in the district only to have the reporter cover a negative aspect of the food service operation. While it may be beneficial to highlight negative situations or make policy makers a little uncomfortable, you should only do this after careful consideration and after you have exhausted all other positive avenues.

Letter to the editor

A letter to the editor is an effective way to educate school board members about school nutrition policy issues, to call for community support of school nutrition policies, and to thank school board members for positive actions they have taken on behalf of nutrition policies.

Keep in mind the following tips:

- Write letters only for the important issues. If you send too many letters, they lose their impact, and may not be printed.
- A letter to the editor should be less than 200 words. Longer letters are more likely to be edited and the point you are trying to get across might be lost. Shorter letters also are more likely to be published.
- Make your most important point(s) in the first or second paragraph.
- If you are responding to a particular article, editorial, or letter, be sure to include the title, date, and author of the piece in your first sentence.
- Have your letter signed by an officer in your organization, a parent in the school district, or your coalition.

Source: Breckon, Harvey, & Lancaster (1994).

Press release

Press releases should be utilized when you have something important to announce. For example, you might publicize a change in a school nutrition program, the start of a new school nutrition policy, or the results of a school nutrition assessment. Many newspapers have an education reporter who covers school board issues and may be very interested in receiving your press release.

Press releases should contain:

- Local statistics.
- Quotes from specialists (e.g., pediatricians, food service staff, nutritionists).
- Facts, not opinions, unless you are quoting someone.
- Critical information (who, what, when, where, why) summarized in the first one or two paragraphs which are two to four sentences long.
- Contact and telephone number at the top of the page (use organizational letterhead if available). Consider giving a cell phone number so that you are quickly accessible.
- A catchy title that gives the editor a good idea of the subject of your release.
- Most releases say “*For immediate release*” or

“For release on (specify date).”

- # # # # at the end of the release.
- News releases MUST follow the proper format or they will be thrown away. Usually, double-spaced on 8.5”x11” paper, 1” margins, 10-12 letter font size.

Source: Breckon, Harvey, & Lancaster (1994).

School board task forces

Volunteering on school board task forces, especially health-related ones, is an excellent way to get to know school board members and for them to get to know your policy issues. It will help your progress if school board members come to see you as a helpful resource. Task force work will give you a voice beyond your own particular issues. School board members like to know that you are committed to children in the district beyond just your issue. A partner who already serves on a district task force may be willing to convey your nutrition policy message when appropriate.

Worksheet © can be found on page 16.

D. Craft a School District Nutrition Policy.

Your ultimate goal is to motivate your school board to strengthen its nutrition policies and/or create new ones. After you do your initial round of education, you will receive one of three responses from the school board, “yes,” “maybe,” or “no.” Each of these answers requires a different response.

YES

This is the answer you want to hear! Usually this means that the board is interested in and supportive of your policy recommendation. The school board may move right to the policy writing stage. Many school districts have attorneys who assist them in crafting policies because developing

policy language is a technical process. Specific language needs to be utilized in order for the policy to be easily understood and for it to be legally accurate. Your role in this process can be to suggest the topics that need to be addressed and to provide the school board with nutrition resources. If your school board asks for your assistance in crafting policy language, work very closely with the school district to assure that you use appropriate language.

MAYBE

This often means that the school board wants more information or more time to think about the issue before proceeding. They may want to know more about parent opinions or about what other school districts have done. Some school boards will set up a committee or task force to find additional information and/or make recommendations to the board. You can serve as an important resource during this process. You may be invited to serve on the committee or you can serve as an outside resource to the school board. Your goal during this period is to maintain constant but polite pressure on the board to take action. Your work group and partners can help you decide on additional strategies. Additional information like healthy fundraising ideas or parent opinions may need to be collected. Once the board starts to lean toward “yes” or “no,” you can take the next steps toward policy development.

In either case, you will want to utilize the work of other school districts that have worked on nutrition policy. California Project LEAN and the California School Boards Association have developed a *Healthy Food Policy Resource Guide* to assist board members in crafting healthy nutrition policies. The guide provides sample policies and case studies from districts that have tackled nutrition policy. To order this guide go to www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org

NO

This is the answer everyone dreads. But don't stop work. A "no" means step back and reconsider your game plan. Try setting a new goal of moving the board to a "maybe" instead of a "no." Some questions to answer include:

- Should we continue to ask for the same policy or is there a new policy with which we will have greater success? Is there a compromise we can make on our recommendation?
- Should we focus our efforts on finding solutions to the concerns of board members before continuing with the policy recommendation? For example, maybe you need more information on revenue in the district before proceeding.
- Will public pressure encourage the school board to take action? Media coverage or letter writing campaigns can create pressure.
- Are there other organizations/individuals who can influence board members more effectively than our current partners? Eventually, you may need to accept a "no" if your attempts to meet the needs of the board members and to reframe your message do not work. Chances are, though, that you have gone a long way toward educating your school board and your community about nutrition policies.

Regardless of your outcome, remember to thank your school board. It is important to recognize school board members who become publicly involved as school nutrition champions. This will encourage them to continue working on the issue and will also bring some positive attention to the district's support of healthy eating. Some ways to publicly thank school board members include:

- Nominating a board member who has been a champion for your issue for an award from a community or statewide organization. The California School Boards Association has an annual awards program, for example.

- Presenting your champion with a plaque.
- Informing the media of how an individual school board member contributed to your effort. Include their name in your press releases and letters to the editor.

Worksheet D can be found on page 17.

Conclusion

Educating school board members takes careful planning and coordination. If you take time to think carefully about the nutrition policies you would like to see implemented and how you will communicate them to school board members, you will have a better chance of creating a "win-win" situation for all involved. You will have an opportunity to describe your policy priorities and board members will have the opportunity to gain the information they need to make an informed policy decision.

The worksheet templates on pages fourteen-through-seventeen will help you organize your thoughts and create an action plan that is clear, concise, and compelling.

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Acknowledgements

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Discover School Board Members' Interests & Concerns^A

School Board Member's Name: _____

Work Telephone: _____

E-Mail: _____

Refer to page 6 in this workbook for more information.

	How will you find it?	Timeline	Responsible party	What did you find?
Special interest(s)				
Chronic disease interest(s)				
Issues currently before the board				
Member's concerns with your policy				
Member's interest in your policy				
Is the member a possible advocate?				
Other				

Recruit Partners to Help You

Describe the type of partners you will need in order to address the board members' interests and concerns. How will you recruit these partners? Remember, school board members can also serve as effective partners. Refer to page 8 in this workbook for more information.

School Board Member's Name: _____

Board Member's Interest/Concern

Potential Partner to Assist

Recruitment Technique

Timeline

Responsible Party

Educate School Board Members

Describe how you will communicate your policy message to the school board. How will you tie your message to board members' concerns and interests? Refer to page 10 within this workbook for more information.

School Board Member's Name: _____

Policy Message

Partner Who Will Present Message

Education Technique

Training Partner Will Need

Timeline

Responsible Party

Craft a School District Nutrition Policy

Describe the steps for achieving your policy change goal after your initial interaction with the school board. Plan a strategy for a "yes," "maybe," and "no" response from the school board. Remember to include a strategy to thank the board. Refer to page 11 within this workbook for more information.

School Board: _____

YES How will you help them craft a policy?

Strategy _____

Timeline _____

Responsible party _____

MAYBE How will you help them decide to craft a policy?

Strategy _____

Timeline _____

Responsible party _____

NO How will you get them to agree to consider crafting a policy?

Strategy _____

Timeline _____

Responsible party _____