



**SOUTHERNERS**  
FOR FAIR SCHOOL FUNDING  
POWERED BY EDTRUST-TENNESSEE

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# Action Guide

**Southerners for Fair School Funding**

[FUNDSOUTHERNSCHOOLS.ORG](https://fundsouthernschools.org)





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# About Southerners for Fair School Funding

[Southerners for Fair School Funding](#) is an initiative powered by [EdTrust-Tennessee](#) that supports advocates across the South who are building a movement to fairly fund every school. After leading a coalition of over 80 organizations to secure the passage of a student-based funding formula in Tennessee, we now partner with communities across the region so that every student will have the resources they need to thrive.

We provide tools and training on school funding advocacy, coalition building, and effective messaging, along with our [State Ratings Rubric](#) – a framework grounded in research, best practices, and student-centered values to assess the fairness of state funding systems. We support organizations and advocates in Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

Together we can transform school funding across the South, and create generational change for students and communities. Southern progress is national progress.

## How to Use This Action Guide

**This advocacy guidebook is designed to help advocates like you make the strongest case for more fair school funding across the South.** It is informed by years of in-depth, hands-on experience working with states on education funding across the U.S. and extensive messaging research, providing powerful insights and proven strategies to drive successful advocacy in the South. It includes core messaging and issue-specific messaging to give you the tools to build compelling arguments and take action.

- ➔ **Core Messaging:** These messages outline the heart of the problem and explain why school funding reform is essential across the South. They provide a broad overview of the challenges and opportunities we face as a region.
- ➔ **Issue-Specific Messaging:** These messages dive deeper into how education funding impacts specific communities and long-term outcomes, such as multilingual learners, rural schools, or students from low-income backgrounds. They're meant to be flexible and a la carte – choose the messages that resonate most with the challenges in your area to build your advocacy strategy.

➔ **Advocacy Tools:** From best practices for drafting opinion editorials and guidance in delivering legislative testimony, these tools are intended to alleviate capacity constraints so Southern advocates can easily deploy communications tactics to support increased education funding throughout the South.

We encourage you to use this language as a starting point and tailor it to fit your local context, adding details like county names, specific schools, or unique challenges in your community to make your advocacy more impactful. To further strengthen your message, we recommend incorporating relevant state or district-specific data on student demographics, achievement gaps, and funding disparities. For example, statistics like “NC has 55,000 students classified as English Learners” or “The GA district with the most students living in poverty received \$1,850 less per student than the district with the fewest” can make your case even more compelling and grounded in local reality.

Once you’ve identified the messages that best fit your work, use them to develop advocacy tools like letters to lawmakers, op-eds, or social media posts. The templates in the next section are here to help you turn these messages into action, pushing lawmakers to invest in the students who need it most across the South.

After your efforts to reform education funding are successful, celebrate your success! It will be an exciting time for your organization, and your work deserves to be honored. However, the impact of these funding changes on academic results will take time.

**At that point, results will depend on how that funding is used and monitored, shifting the focus to equitable spending, transparency, and data reporting. Take time to celebrate, then get ready for the next stage of the work.**

Together, we can fight for fair school funding that helps every student reach their full potential.

## Messaging Guiding Principles

### 1. Tailor the Message to Your Context

Messaging is not one-size-fits-all. To be effective, it must be adapted to the audience, messenger, and context. Whether you’re advocating at the national level, within a specific community, or addressing a unique local challenge, tailor the message to reflect the priorities and context you’re working within.



## 2. **The Messenger Matters**

The impact of a message is amplified by the right messenger. Consider who your audience trusts and connects with. Whether it's a community leader, a teacher, a local policymaker, or a parent, the messenger can make all the difference in resonating with the audience.

## 3. **Avoid Assumptions About Your Audience**

Understand your audience's values, concerns, and experiences. Never assume that your audience knows exactly what you know. Language should be clear, simple, and accessible. Tailoring your messaging to be inclusive, relevant, and easy to follow will help you build trust and ensure the message resonates.

## 4. **Focus on Positives, Not Just Problems**

In advocating for school funding, it's easy to focus on the issues and gaps. However, it's equally important to highlight actionable solutions. Show how addressing funding inequities will lead to concrete improvements in communities and the lives of children. Present a vision for the future, with clear steps to achieve it, and motivate your audience to take action.



# Core Messaging



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# Topline Message

**Public schools in the South have faced years of underfunding, leaving many students without the resources they need to succeed in school and in life.** Proper funding helps schools prepare students for good jobs, healthier lives, and stronger communities. Privatization and quick fixes only take focus away from the real solution – investing in public schools. Southerners for Fair School Funding, powered by EdTrust-Tennessee, helps advocates push for more funding and better use of resources so every student in the South has a fair chance to succeed. **When the South succeeds, it drives progress and opportunity for the entire country.**

## Why School Funding?

**Strong schools are the foundation of strong communities.** When schools get the funding they need, more students graduate, secure good jobs, and live healthier lives. However, schools that need the most funding often receive less state support, and this gap is worsened by wealthier districts contributing more of their own funds. Every student is different, so funding should meet their individual needs, help schools adapt to changes, and support long-term community growth. Short-term solutions and years of underfunding have hurt communities across the South, holding families back. By investing more in public schools and ensuring that money reaches the students and schools that need it most, we can create communities where everyone has the chance to succeed.

## Why the South?

**The South plays a critical role in America’s progress, educating half of the nation’s Black students, one-third of all public school students, and a growing Latino student population.** While the South’s people, economy, and landscape are evolving for the better, there is still work to do to ensure it becomes a place where every student and every person can thrive. Rural schools, often community hubs, face big challenges like outdated buildings, teacher shortages, and too few resources. At the same time, underserved urban schools grapple with overcrowded classrooms, outdated materials, and insufficient support for students. Fair funding is critical to give all students the quality education they deserve. Investing in schools across the South isn’t just necessary – it’s an opportunity to unlock potential and position the region as a leader in growth and opportunity.

### Why Now?

**With pandemic-era funding – the largest education investment in recent memory – now gone, Southern schools are once again grappling with rising demands and shrinking resources.** These funds weren't a luxury; they highlighted decades of chronic underfunding that left schools struggling. Without action, privatization schemes like vouchers and short-sighted solutions will only deepen disparities. Yet, successes in Tennessee and Mississippi show that big policy changes in school funding are possible when communities and policymakers work together to invest in our children's future. This is a pivotal moment to prioritize public education and ensure every student in the South has the resources to thrive.

## Call to Action

We all feel the impact of underfunded schools, but together, we can make real change happen.

**By amplifying the importance of fair school funding, elevating the voices of students and families, and uniting communities around shared values like fairness and opportunity, we can build a South where schools are thriving, families are supported, and communities are more resilient than ever.**

Together, we can ensure every student has the resources to succeed and create a legacy of opportunity and strength for future generations.





# Issue-Specific Messaging



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# Increasing Education Funding and Directing it Where it is Needed Most

## Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Many students from low-income backgrounds come to school needing extra help to be ready to learn, but their schools often lack essential resources like healthy meals, counselors, and enough great teachers. **This isn't just about individual students – it's about whole communities, including districts and regions, where poverty and limited resources make it even harder for schools to support kids.** These challenges hold students back, limit their opportunities, and hurt local economies. By investing in these schools and giving local leaders the flexibility to direct funds where they're needed most, **we can close gaps, break cycles of poverty, and help students, families, and communities thrive.** Advocates need to push for policies that give these schools and communities the support they need.

## English Learners

**Students learning English are one of the fastest-growing student populations in the South,** and they deserve the support they need to succeed. Millions of families across the region speak a language other than English at home, yet schools often lack the resources to meet their needs. Districts require additional funding to direct resources where they're most needed – such as bilingual educators, translation services for families, and culturally relevant materials – to help students reach their full potential. Advocates must push for investments that ensure English Learners have the tools to thrive both in school and in life.

## Students with Disabilities

Every child deserves the chance to learn and grow, but for millions of students with disabilities, this requires the proper support. **Fifteen percent of all public school students – 7.5 million children – live with a disability,** including millions in the South, where one-third of all public school students are educated. **Unfortunately, many schools lack the funding needed to provide trained staff, adaptive tools, and personalized support plans.** Funding for students with disabilities must address their specific learning needs, helping create inclusive spaces where all students can reach their full potential. Advocates must push for policies that ensure students with disabilities receive the support and opportunities they deserve across the South.



## Rural Schools

Rural schools face serious challenges, often receiving less funding due to lower property taxes and fewer homes. This leads to limited resources and opportunities for students.

**Despite misconceptions, nearly 50% of public schools in the South are rural, serving as vital community hubs.** However, rural schools must spend more per student due to smaller enrollment sizes, and many struggle with outdated facilities, fewer programs, and difficulty recruiting skilled teachers. **Flexible funding allows rural schools to respond to their unique challenges, providing modern tools, attracting skilled teachers, and addressing their specific needs.** To give every child a fair chance, we must prioritize funding solutions that support rural schools and their communities.

## Role of Race on Education Funding in the South

**When we travel to Black, Latino, and other communities of color in the South, we see resource gaps rooted in segregation and unjust practices that *Brown v. Board of Education* aimed to address. Seventy years after Brown, these inequities still deny students access to the resources they need, keeping barriers in place and holding back entire communities. Fixing this long-standing problem will require targeted investments in these schools for fairness, better student outcomes, and stronger, more successful communities. **Local leaders need the flexibility to spend funds in ways that will best close these gaps and provide the support students need. Advocates must push for policies that tackle these injustices and give every student a fair shot at success.****

## Faith Communities and Education Funding

Faith communities recognize the importance of supporting their communities, especially children. **When schools are underfunded, it goes against shared values like justice, opportunity, and caring for your neighbor.** Fully funding public schools upholds these principles, giving every child access to a quality education that helps families and communities thrive. People of faith must advocate for education funding as a moral responsibility, ensuring every child has the resources they need to succeed.

# Calling for Flexible, Transparent, and Accountable Education Funding

## Trump Administration and Education Funding

**President Trump’s plans to dismantle the Department of Education and slash federal funding put the future of public schools – and students – in the South at risk.** With ESSER pandemic relief funds gone and potential federal changes on the horizon, state and local leaders have an even bigger role to play. **Their decisions have always mattered since they provide the most funding for schools, and now bold action is needed to protect public education and ensure every student has the resources they need to thrive – no matter what happens in Washington.**

## Flexible Allocation of Education Funding

Local school leaders know their students’ needs best and should have the flexibility to decide how funding is spent – whether for hiring teachers, starting programs, or providing extra support. Yet, many states have rigid funding rules that limit schools’ ability to adapt. Student-based funding solves this by allowing money to follow students’ needs, giving schools the freedom to use it where it will make the biggest difference. By combining flexibility with transparency, we can ensure resources are used effectively to improve education and build stronger communities across the South.

## Vouchers

**Voucher programs take money away from public schools to help pay for private schools, often benefiting wealthier families who can already afford private education.** This hurts public schools and leaves most Southern students who rely on them without the resources they need to do well. Despite their claims, vouchers do not improve education outcomes, and they distract from the real issue: the need to fully fund public schools and allocate resources to the students and communities that need them most. **Protecting public school funding isn’t just about opposing vouchers – it’s about championing real solutions that give every student a fair chance at success and strengthen local communities in the process.**



## Transparency

Families and communities deserve to know how their schools are funded and how those dollars are spent – whether it’s on teacher salaries, classroom supplies, student programs, or critical support services. **It’s especially important to track money meant for specific student groups, like low-income students, English Learners, or students with disabilities, to make sure it’s reaching the kids who need it most. Student-based funding gives local leaders like school boards and principals the flexibility to decide what works best, but transparency is key to building trust and making sure resources are used fairly.** Clear reporting and easy-to-understand funding systems help communities hold decision-makers accountable and improve education for all students across the South.

## Working Across the Aisle

**Investing in our schools isn’t about politics – it’s about people.** It’s about giving every student, no matter where they come from, the tools to succeed and the opportunity to reach their full potential. Education is the foundation of strong communities and a prosperous South, and ensuring fair school funding demands that leaders from all sides come together. **This isn’t a partisan issue; it’s a shared responsibility and a chance to shape a brighter future for all.** When we unite around our shared values – opportunity, fairness, and resilience – we can transform education and empower every student to succeed.

# Investing in Public Education Builds Stronger Southern Communities

## Creating Safe and Supportive Southern Schools

Every child deserves a safe and supportive school environment where they can learn without fear. Many schools lack the resources to address bullying, mental health challenges, or other safety concerns, leaving students without the support they need. **Increased funding can provide mental health professionals, anti-bullying programs, and trauma-informed resources to create secure, inclusive spaces.** Advocates must call for investments that prioritize both physical safety and emotional well-being, ensuring every student has the foundation to succeed in school and in life.

## Investing in Diverse, Quality Teachers and Support Staff

**A strong school needs more than great teachers – it requires a team of professionals, including counselors, librarians, and support staff, who reflect the diversity of their students and play critical roles in student success.** Yet, underfunded schools often can't attract or retain this talent, leading to larger class sizes and fewer resources for students. **Increased funding can provide competitive salaries, professional development, and better working conditions to show educators and staff their work is valued and ensure every student has access to the support they need.** We must push for the funding and policies that enable schools to attract and retain diverse, qualified staff who can build strong, supportive learning environments.

## A Win for Businesses and Communities

**Thriving schools are the backbone of thriving economies.** When schools have the funding they need, students graduate ready to join the workforce, helping businesses grow and attract new talent. In the South, where many schools still don't have enough resources, investing in education isn't just about helping students – it's about building a stronger future for the whole region.

**Well-funded schools create skilled workers, strengthen communities, and make the area more appealing to businesses. The business community has a big role to play in making sure schools get the support they need, creating opportunities that benefit everyone.**



# Advocacy Tools



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# Op-Ed Best Practices and Guidance

## What is an Op-Ed?

Op-Ed stands for “opposite the editorial page” and they are reader-written articles that you can use to advocate for your issue. By securing an op-ed placement, you can amplify your stance on an issue, or introduce a new solution.

## What do you need before writing an Op-Ed?

Use an op-ed to take advantage of a historic event or moment in time that demands further context. Op-Eds are best when they:

- Leverage new or compelling data, breaking news, and relatable human experience.
- Have a defined point of view and audience in mind.
- Use a distinct voice (it will be important to keep this voice consistent).
  - Will you be authoritative? Urgent? No nonsense? Hopeful?

## Questions to ask yourself

- Why is the topic **relevant right now**?
- What is the **overarching point/argument** I would like to make? How is it different from what other people are saying?
- What about my **personal or professional experience** is unique? Be specific.
  - *How can I talk about my personal story in a way that would bolster this argument?*
- What makes my experience interesting to the reader? Why should they read this?

## The Anatomy of an Opinion Article

### 1. The Lede

This is the first sentence or two of your article. Make sure it is compelling, grabs your reader immediately, and connects to current events to be timely.

### 2. The Thesis

This is your statement of purpose or your core argument. Why is your topic important to your audience?

### 3. The Argument and Your Opinion

Have up to three main points and evidence to back up each one. This is where you'd lay out in detail the landscape of the topic you're discussing to capture the magnitude of the problem. Then lay out your proposed solution to address this problem.

### 4. The Rebuttal

Preemptively address potential critics and counter arguments by choosing one of the most obvious ones to counter. This demonstrates your thoughtfulness and helps overcome those objections that readers may raise, especially given the nature of our sensitive subject matter.

### 5. Conclusion

Circle back to your lede and leave your readers with a clear takeaway and/or call to action.

## Op-Ed Examples

- [As a Tennessee rural educator, I fear that school voucher expansion will hurt our children,](#)  
The Tennessean, Feb 28, 2024
- [Alabama's education funding formula must change to empower all our children,](#)  
Alabama Daily News, Aug. 22, 2024
- [Tennessee must see through Gov. Bill Lee's new try at expanding school vouchers,](#)  
The Tennessean, Nov. 22, 2024
- [School choice backers keep changing their story,](#)  
Clarion Ledger, Dec. 10, 2024

## Op-Ed Guidance

1. **Keep it simple** – avoid jargon and acronyms.
2. Make **one clear argument** and start with your strongest point.
3. Use descriptive language, short sentences, and **active voice**.
4. Engage your reader by answering, *"Why should they care?"*
5. Address criticism and offer a **clear recommendation or action**.
6. **Connect personally** with anecdotes relevant to your audience.
7. Keep your word count between 600–1000 words.

## Tips for Pitching Op-Eds

- **Choose the Right Outlet:** Identify your target outlets based on the audience you want to reach. Keep in mind that outlets require exclusivity so you'll have to pitch an outlet one at a time.
- **Check Submission Guidelines:** Each outlet has specific requirements for length and format – you can typically find these on their op-ed submission page (also check out the [Op-Ed Project](#)).
- **Craft a Compelling Pitch:** In your email, address:
  - a. Why now? What's the news hook?
  - b. So what? Why should their readers care?
  - c. Why me? What makes you the best author for this piece?
- **Submission:** Include your op-ed, contact info, address, and a brief bio.
- **Follow Up:** Don't hesitate to check in on your submission a few days after pitching. If it doesn't work out, move on to another outlet and try again.

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### Template: Op-Ed Pitch

Subj: Op-Ed Submission: *[Insert op-ed title]*

Hi *[insert opinion editor's name/editorial dept]*,

I am submitting the op-ed below on behalf of *[insert organization]*. The piece provides the much needed perspective that *[insert thesis statement/main point of the op-ed]*.

We think this unique perspective is critical for your readership to hear at this time because *[insert information on why readers should care, and why now]*. Additionally, *[Author]* is a credible source on this topic as they *[express why the author has credibility and expertise on this topic]*. We are also open to any edits/adjustments you feel would make the piece a better fit for your readership.

Thank you for your consideration. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Best,  
*[Your name]*

*[Copy-paste the op-ed here, with the author's bio at the bottom of the piece]*

# LTE Best Practices and Guidance

## What is an LTE?

Letters to the Editor (LTEs) are different from op-eds, in that they:

- are much shorter than an op-ed – average 150–250 words
- are written as a direct response to either an article, an editorial, or an op-ed published in the paper
- should be submitted within 48 hrs of the original article being published

## The Anatomy of a Letter to the Editor

### 1. ID article:

Find the specific article you'd like to respond to. Remember, LTEs are short responses to recent articles that provide a different perspective. This doesn't mean you necessarily have to respond to articles that oppose your point of view – you can also highlight a new perspective or supplement the original reporting presented.

### 2. News Hook

Briefly mention the piece or point you're addressing and the specific argument you're responding to in 1–2 sentences.

### 3. Statement of Position

Clearly state your position and why you feel this way, using personal experiences/expertise to add weight to your opinion. Highlight why it's important for others to recognize your view.

### 4. Closing Argument

End by reiterating your commitment to the cause. Include your willingness to work with leaders, stakeholders, and the broader community (as applicable).

## LTE Examples

- [Libraries offer limitless opportunities](#), The Champion, Apr. 10, 2024
- [Florida's parents play vital role in ensuring kids can read | Letters](#), Tampa Bay Times, Dec 4, 2024
- [Public education is at stake this year](#), The Appalachian, May 1, 2024



## Guidance for Writing LTEs

- Be concise and write conversationally.
- Give local context for your perspective and why it is important.
- Leverage personal experience/expertise.

## Tips for Pitching LTEs

- Cover these key points (in 2–3 short paragraphs):
  - a. Why your response is relevant, referencing the original piece
  - b. Why the outlet’s audience will care
- Include the original article you are responding to, your contact info, address, and a brief bio.

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### Template: LTE Pitch

Subject: LTE Submission: Response to *[insert title of article you’re responding to]*

Hi *[insert opinion editor’s name/editorial dept]*,

I am submitting the LTE below in response to your recent article *[include the article title and date you’re responding to, hyperlinked if you can]*.

We think this unique perspective is critical for your readership to hear at this time because *[insert information on why readers should care, and why now]*. Additionally, *[Author]* is a credible source on this topic as they *[express why the author has credibility and expertise on this topic]*. We are also open to any edits/adjustments you feel would make the piece a better fit for your readership.

Thank you for your consideration. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Best,

*[Your name]*

# Legislative Advocacy Materials

## In-Person or Virtual Testimony Guidance for Legislative Hearings

State and local legislative committees may vary in the rules or protocols for their hearings, so it's recommended to review the legislature's specific rules and regulations online ahead of preparing and delivering testimony.

Confirm whether the hearing will be in-person or virtual. **If it's in person**, make sure you know exactly where it is located and plan to get there 30 minutes early to find parking and navigate into the building. **If it's virtual**, download the meeting invite from the House or Senate's website and make sure to download the meeting platform ahead of time.

Whether it's virtual or in person, remember you will be on record for the convening's entirety.

**The simpler the better.** To make sure your point is easy for the legislature, other citizens, and future readers of the public record to comprehend, focus on two or three main points you want your audience to remember, and use your time to repeat and strengthen these points.

**Practice, practice, practice!** You don't have to memorize your testimony, but you don't want to be staring down at your notes the entire time.

**Speak slowly and clearly.** Your hearing might have simultaneous language translation or captions, which will require you to speak slowly.

## Structuring Your Comments

1. **Introduction:** Introduce yourself, your organization, and why you are testifying – how does your topic or area of expertise relate to their responsibilities and their constituents?
2. **State the problem:** Provide information about the scale and urgency of the issue/bill. Name who is most impacted by this issue, why it's harmful/beneficial to that community. You can include key facts or statistics to back up your position, but remember to avoid jargon and not get bogged down in the data. A personal story or anecdote can help illustrate your connection to the issue and bring your testimony to life.
3. **Offer solutions and alternative considerations:** Include considerations for some of the nuances that the issue presents, but don't lose sight of your main points. At the end, summarize your top two or three takeaways that you hope the audience will remember.

## Meeting with Elected Officials

From your city councilmember to your congressperson, meeting with your elected officials about issues in your community can be an important tactic to make sure your voice is heard. Remember, your legislators work for you!

One meeting can be the beginning of a relationship with your elected official.

1. **Request your meeting:** Many elected officials have designated staff to field meeting requests. Make your request in writing and follow up with a call to the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler. You can also go to their offices and make your request in person. Ensure you include specific times and dates that you're available, what specific bill or issue you'd like to discuss, and that you're a constituent of theirs.
2. **Choose attendees and do your research:** Keep the meeting participants to 2–3 people, but bring people who represent different groups that have an interest in the legislation like educators, community leaders, and school board members, etc. Research the person you're meeting with to make sure you know their background and anything you have in common (e.g., your children play in the same sports league, or you are members of the same church denomination).
3. **Get clear on your message:** Decide on your talking points beforehand and practice them. Make sure you are presenting a unified front during the conversation with a clear point of view and call to action so you know what you'd like to achieve (e.g., their endorsement, a community meeting, a visit to your organization, etc.).
4. **Be on time and succinct:** Elected officials usually have very packed schedules all day every day meeting with constituents. Make sure you're on time for your appointment, and you're focused on your message! You may only have 10–15 minutes with them, so maximize each moment and be sure to save some time for them to ask questions.
5. **Make it personal:** Include personal or local examples of the way either a proposed bill would impact your community (positively or negatively), or leverage the personal, professional, or political connections you have to bring weight to why this is an urgent issue that demands their attention.
6. **Follow up after:** Immediately after the meeting, compare notes amongst attendees to align on what the elected official said and promised during the conversation, and any materials you can send to further make your point. Then each individual should send a personalized thank you note to the office for the commitments they made, reiterating your talking points and the urgent need at this moment.

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### Template: Letters to Elected Officials

Subject: Urgent Need for Increased Education Funding in Our State

Dear *[Elected official name]*,

I am writing to you as a constituent of yours, a concerned citizen and advocate for quality education in *[insert state/county/city/district]*, and on behalf of *[insert organization]*. I believe that our community faces a critical shortage of funding for our schools, and this lack of investment is having a devastating impact on the future of our children.

*[Insert information on your main argument, including any potential solutions you'd like to see; see below for three examples to illustrate how this may look]*

*[Equity]* The inequities in education funding across our region are unacceptable. Many of our schools, particularly those serving low-income and minority students, lack the resources they desperately need to provide a quality education.

This includes access to:

- Experienced and well-paid teachers: Competitive salaries are crucial to attract and retain top talent.
- Up-to-date technology and resources: Students in the 21st century need access to modern learning tools.
- Adequate facilities: Our schools should be safe, clean, and conducive to learning.
- Mental health and social-emotional support: Students need access to the support services they need to thrive.

####

*[Economic development]* A well-educated workforce is essential for the economic growth of our community. However, underfunding our schools is hindering our ability to compete in the global economy. We need to invest in education to:

- Develop the skills of the future: Prepare our students for careers in STEM, technology, and other high-demand fields.
- Boost economic competitiveness: A skilled workforce attracts businesses and drives innovation.



- Reduce poverty and inequality: Education is the pathway to upward mobility for many of our children.

#####

*[Focus on teacher support]* Our teachers are overworked and underpaid. They deserve our respect and support. Increased funding is necessary to:

- Provide competitive salaries and benefits: Attract and retain high-quality educators.
- Invest in professional development: Ensure teachers have the tools and training they need to succeed.
- Reduce class sizes: Allow teachers to provide individualized attention to each student.

*[Include your calls to action for the elected official, see examples below]*

I urge you to:

- Support the recent legislation proposed by *[insert elected official]* that increases funding for education in our community. *[If applicable]*
- Advocate for equitable distribution of resources across all school districts.
- Prioritize the needs of students from low-income families and underserved communities.

I believe that investing in education is an investment in the future of our region. I look forward to your support on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

*[Your name]*

*[Your address (optional)]*

*[Your contact information (optional)]*

# Media Strategy and Engagement Templates

## Media Interview Do's and Don'ts

Influencing key decision-makers via the media is a great strategy – one that many of you may choose to use. However, walking into those conversations can seem daunting as you're potentially opening yourself up to critique. It's a vulnerable position, so we've created the guidance below to help prepare you to knock it out of the park!

### DO:

- Focus on your key points. It may be helpful to reference the messaging in this document as a starting point, but feel free to adapt what's prepared to meet the specific needs/nuances of your community.
- Stay in the present. Stick to what you know and don't make guesses about the future or hypothetical scenarios.
- Anticipate tough questions. Brainstorm some vulnerabilities to your position and know how to respond to them.

### DON'T:

- Use jargon, complex statistics, and hard-to-understand concepts. Keep things simple and succinct.
- Get defensive. Reporters are not your friends, but they are also not your enemy.
- Feel pressured to answer every question directly. Remember that you can always pivot back into your top messages.

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## Template: Media Advisory

The main components of a media advisory are:

1. **Press Contact:** The individual serving as the main contact for media. Be sure to include both an email and a phone number.
2. **Headline and Subhead:** The headline and subhead explain what the media advisory is about in a direct and catchy way. Headlines are your billboard – based on your headline, editors will decide if they want to keep reading the advisory and assign a reporter to the event.
3. **Overview:** A synopsis of the event that you are advising the press to attend. Think of this as your elevator pitch for the event.
4. **Who:** List the individuals who are participating in the event (such as those delivering prepared remarks) and the spokespeople who will be available to speak with the press at the event.
5. **When and Where:** List the location and time for the event. Provide as much detail as is necessary to ensure reporters show up on time and at the right place. If the event requires a ticket or other credentials for entry, provide information on how to receive the ticket.
6. **Why:** Share an overview contextualizing why a reporter should cover this event. This is an opportunity to demonstrate to editors and reporters what makes the event newsworthy. This is the place where you can cite local statistics or data, if available.
7. **How:** In this section you can reiterate how a reporter can RSVP or set up interviews with spokespeople. You can reiterate the name and contact information for the media contact.
8. **Media Notes:** In this section you can outline any visual opportunities, other spokespeople, or any additional information that may be helpful for reporters to know, including materials or visuals that may be made available after the event.
9. **Boilerplate:** The boilerplate briefly describes your organization. This language is typically used in every press release, advisory, or statement your organization produces.

**Media Advisory –** For Planning Purposes Only

**Date** *[Insert date]*

**Press Contact** *[Include email and phone]*

**Insert Catchy One-Line Headline About the Event**

*Insert a Subhead with Catchy Additional Detail in Italics*

**What:** *[This is your overview. Insert a brief, one-paragraph description of your event and significant participants, and why the media should be interested in attending your event.]*

**Who:** *[Insert full names of speakers, and other relevant persons of interest to the media.] E.g., Dr. Jane Doe, Executive Director of Organization [full name and title]*

**When:** *[Insert date] [Insert time]*

**Where:** *[Insert location] [Insert address]*

**Why:** *[Why is this event newsworthy? Why should the media cover it? In this section, you may also cite local statistics, if available.]*

**How:** For interviews or additional information please contact *[insert full name, telephone number, and e-mail address.]*

\*If there is a good photo or video opportunity at your event, insert a note about it here. (E.g., Photo/video with natural sound will include providers speaking, children learning, etc.)

###

*Boilerplate Language: A brief overview about your organization.*

# Press Conference Best Practices

## Know Your Goal

Before you plan a press conference you should be very clear about your goals. This will help you do a better job of planning the press conference. Some options include:

- to get publicity about your efforts and problems
- to get widespread media coverage
- to send a message to a decision-maker about what you want
- to get more people involved in your organization
- to develop the skills of your members
- to show the strength of your group
- some combination of the above

Keep these goals in mind as you plan your conference, as it'll have implications on your invite list, messaging, materials, etc. Whatever your organizational goals are, remember that you have to have something newsworthy to announce, reveal, or talk about at your press conference.

## Set a Location

Find an appropriate place that is convenient and has the facilities you need. The location of the press conference depends on your needs and the specific circumstances of your situation. Dramatize your position by choosing a good backdrop. If you decide to hold the press conference indoors, be ready to provide technical assistance for reporters, such as phones, microphones, enough light, etc. Avoid large rooms that give the appearance that few people attended. Be sure to have a podium for speakers to use when presenting.

## Timing Matters

Set the date and time of the press conference, taking into account reporters' deadlines. Usually the best days of the week to get news coverage are Tuesday through Thursday in the morning. Check to see that there are no competing news events already scheduled at the time of your conference. And be sure to start the event on time – don't keep the reporters waiting.



## Prepare A “Press Kit”

Reporters and guests may wish to have a copy of written statements or a press release. You can prepare a packet of factsheets, charts, or graphs that will help inform attendees and increase the likelihood of having your data points and messaging in any news pieces created. If you distribute materials prior to the event, be sure to use an embargo to prevent journalists from publishing before the press conference. However, we’d recommend waiting until after the event to release information to create an element of suspense. Possible materials to create include:

- News release
- List of news conference participants
- Executive summary of report
- Case studies and stories
- Fact sheets and graphs
- Biography and photos of speakers, and copies of speeches

## Invite Media and Guests

Make phone calls and send written invitations to prospective guests you want to have at the press conference, such as other members of your group, allies, and friendly politicians (depending on your goals). When inviting media, focus on getting the most influential media to attend across TV, print, and radio outlets. Begin outreach to your invitees a few days before the event, and always make follow up calls the day before to confirm that journalists are coming. Finally, create a “sign-in” sheet for journalists so you have a record of who attended and can follow up with all the aforementioned materials in the press kit.

## Choose and Prepare Moderator Spokespeople

Choose a moderator to open the conference, introduce the topic, and facilitate transitions between spokespeople. Generally, it’s good to have just one or two speakers during a press conference so people don’t talk on top of each other, or mix the message. Select strong speakers who are charismatic, articulate, and authoritative. Rehearse with the speaker(s) to make statements brief and clear and usually no longer than ten minutes. Have each speaker make different points, while still focusing on the main message. The spokesperson should be experienced in the subject and able to respond to questions after the statement.

Often reporters want to interview the spokesperson. Let the press know that the speaker is available after the press conference. Prepare your speaker with 30-second answers for radio or TV, and quotable, simple messages for reporters. Consider drafting panelist talking points before the press conference to align on messaging.

### Practice!

Organize a call and rehearse the day before with whoever will be hosting the event. Practice roles with the members of your group so everyone understands their position in the event. Think about what will happen all the way through the press conference, and how it will look to reporters. The key question to ask is “What if...?” What if reporters ask a non-spokesperson member a question? What if your opponents show up and heckle? Create a list of questions to anticipate with sample answers, and help your speakers practice with a video camera or tape recorder.

### Post Briefing To Do's

Send the press kit to all the attendees on the sign in sheet. Create a wrap-up memo to track the event's earned media hits across print, TV, and radio, including accompanying links to the content. Email panelists a thank you, and consider sending the wrap-up memo with the media hits shortly after the event.

# Rapid Response Planning Protocol

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## Template: Email Blast

Things to keep in mind in the midst of a crisis:

- You don't need to have an answer at this moment. You just need to show that you are solving it.
- Keep the email concise and to the point.
- Use a clear and urgent tone.
- Include a strong call to action.
- Include high-quality images or videos that showcase the impact of your work.
- Proofread carefully before sending.

Subject: We Will Continue to Support Our Community! Response to *[insert crisis]*

Dear Supporter,

We are writing to you today in response to *[insert crisis]*. *[Briefly explain the reason for the crisis, e.g., government budget reductions, loss of a major grant]*. *[Insert organization]* is committed to *[insert organization's mission]*, and this will not change, despite these recent attacks on our important work.

In moments like these, we are encouraged by our amazing community of supporters like you! We are in the midst of planning how we will respond to this event, and we need your help. We understand that these are challenging times for everyone, but even the smallest contribution can make a significant difference.

Here are some ways you can help:

- **Make a financial donation:** Every dollar counts! You can donate securely online at *[link to donation page]*.
- **Spread the word:** Share this email with your friends, family, and colleagues.

- **Volunteer your time:** We always need volunteers to help with *[list specific volunteer opportunities, e.g., “serving meals,” “tutoring students,” “organizing events”]*.
- **Contact your elected officials:** Urge your representatives to support funding for *[insert organization]* and other vital community services.

We are deeply grateful for your support and for your continued commitment to our mission. Together, we can overcome this challenge and continue to make a positive impact in our community.

Sincerely,  
*[Insert organization]*

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### Template: Social Media Post

Remember before posting:

- **Use high-quality images:** Images are crucial for capturing attention on social media.
- **Keep it concise:** Social media users have short attention spans.
- **Clear CTA:** Include a clear ask for your community with a link that they can use to engage with.
- **Use of emojis and casual language:** Add personality and makes the posts more engaging.
- **Use relevant hashtags:** Increase the visibility of your posts.
- **Monitor and engage:** Respond to comments and questions from your followers.
- **Focus on community and connection:** Emphasize the importance of collective action.

**Legislative/Political Attack**

**Image:** A photo of people organizing/protesting

**Text:** 📰 Breaking News: A bill has been signed that will have a devastating impact on *[briefly explain impact, e.g., “our community’s most vulnerable members,” “vital programs that provide food, shelter, and support”]*. We can’t let this happen! Contact *[insert elected official, e.g. your representative, mayor, city councilperson, etc.]* asking them to #Support*[insert service]* Now! And consider donating to support *[mention specific program]* today! *[Link to donation page]* #*[relevant hashtags]* #Support*[community name]*

**Sign-on Letter/Petition**

**Image:** A visual of a petition being signed, a close-up of hands signing a letter, or a digital mockup of the sign-on letter itself

**Text:** 📰 Urgent Need! Our schools and students are being impacted by *[insert specific issue, e.g., ‘outdated funding policies that leave classrooms underresourced’]*—but together, we can demand change. Sign our petition to call on leaders to prioritize fair funding for our schools. Your support is critical to ensuring every child has the resources they need to succeed. Add your name today: *[link to petition]* #*[relevant hashtags]* #*[community name]*”

**Volunteer Support**

**Image:** A photo of volunteers or staff working together

**Text:** We can’t do this alone! ❤️ Or incredible volunteers allow us to reach so many more people with our *[mention specific program, e.g., “our meal delivery program for seniors”]*. And right now, we need your help more than ever. We are in urgent need of volunteers for *[insert project or time period]*. Visit *[volunteer site link]* to learn more and support our mission. #*[relevant hashtags]* #Support*[community name]*





# Who is EdTrust-Tennessee?

At EdTrust-Tennessee, we work to improve equity in education from preschool through college. Partnering with communities, we provide in-depth analysis, equity-focused research, and expert guidance to shape policies and practices that expand opportunity, access, and success for all learners. Together, we are driving change and creating the conditions where every student thrives.

## Did you use our advocacy tools?

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