



# NATIONAL POLICY AGENDA FOR THE MIDDLE GRADES

**AMLE Member  
Advocacy Toolkit**



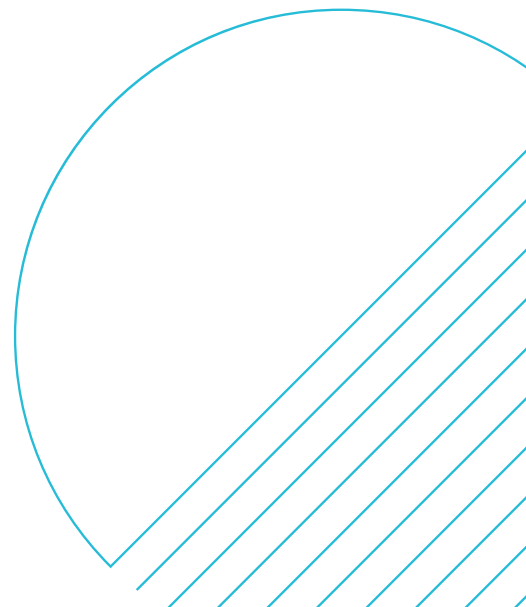
**ASSOCIATION FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION**

**Nov. 2023**



## **Our Mission**

**REACH EVERY STUDENT**  
**GROW PROFESSIONALLY**  
**CREATE GREAT SCHOOLS**





## WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

“The act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy; active support”





## WHY AMLE?

AMLE is the only national association of its kind dedicated to supporting the middle grades, specifically. With a rich history 50+ years in the making, and a community of 35,000+ members, AMLE is uniquely positioned to advocate for the educational needs of young adolescents.





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# THE FEDERAL PROCESS

"The federal government now spends one of every four dollars in the entire economy."



# WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING?



Many organizations shy away from activities they presume to be lobbying but which in fact fall outside of the definition of lobbying. Lobbying does not include, for instance, nonpartisan analysis of legislation, the expression of a position on issues (as opposed to legislation) of public concern, or action taken in “self-defense” of the organization.

Non-profits, like AMLE, are actually one of the most effective vehicles for making use of citizen participation in shaping public policy. It is rare that AMLE advocates would find themselves in a gray area between advocacy and lobbying. There are three key aspects to remember:

1. Advocacy is organized action in support of an idea or cause,
2. Advocacy is constituents educating elected officials on important issues, and
3. Advocacy is establishing ongoing and trusting relationships.



# THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND EDUCATION

While education is not explicitly mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, the federal government plays a significant role in establishing legislation and standards, providing funding, and ensuring that all students have access to quality education. However, the 10th Amendment reserves the power to govern education to the states, allowing them to set their policies and regulations. AMLE's National Policy Agenda for the Middle Grades explicitly mentions the following legislation/federal departments:

- **The U.S. Department of Education (USED):** A cabinet-level Department with 4,400 employees and a \$68 billion budget. It's aims are to establish policies on federal financial aid, collect data on America's school and disseminate research, focus national attention on key educational issues, prohibit discrimination and ensure equal access to education.
- **The Elementary and Secondary Act** (also known as the Every Student Succeeds Act or ESSA): The nation's national education law which replaces the previous version, the No Child Left Behind Act. It contains several highly influential provisions, including requiring annual statewide assessments that measure student progress, and providing financial assistance to schools with high numbers of children from low income families (known as Title I)
- **The Higher Education Act:** Governs the administration of federal higher education programs, including student and federal aid programs to colleges and oversight of teacher preparation programs.
- **The Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA):** Designed, in part, to help youth into high-quality jobs and careers. Currently only applies to youth in secondary or postsecondary school.
- **Education Services Reform Act (ESRA):** Authorizes much of the federal government's efforts to collect statistics and conduct research on the U.S. educational system.





# FUNDING EDUCATION AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL



The US Congress is charged by the Constitution with making decisions about how to spend public money. In practice, these spending decisions are made via two processes. One is the debate and enactment of authorizing legislation. The other is the development and enactment of appropriations bills via the federal budget process.

- **“Authorization”** is done by Congress via legislation that “can establish, continue, or modify an agency, program, or activity for a fixed or indefinite period of time.”
- **“Appropriations”** are done by Congress via legislation that authorizes agencies to make payments from the federal Treasury (i.e. it allows them to spend the money that had previously been authorized).

Appropriations bills are ordinarily passed each year, but in recent years it has been common for Congress to fund the government “on autopilot” via continuing resolutions that simply allow agencies to continue spending the same amount of money they were spending under the previous funding bill, or via large “omnibus” bills that combine many spending bills into one measure.





# ADVOCATING

"If you're not at the table,  
you're on the menu."



# FINDING YOUR LEGISLATOR



## Federal Government Contact Information

- To learn who your represents you in the House of Representatives and the two Senators who represent you in the US Senate, visit <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members> and enter your address.
- If you prefer accessing this information by phone, call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121.

## State Government Contact Information

- To learn who your Governor is, visit <https://www.usa.gov/stategovernor/> and choose your state.
- To learn more about your State Legislature, visit <https://www.congress.gov/state-legislature-websites> and choose your state.

## Local Government Contact Information

- Visit <https://www.usmayors.org/mayors/> to learn more about your mayor by name, city, or population size.
- To learn more about the head of the executive branch of government in your county, visit <http://explorer.naco.org/> and enter city/zip code, county, or state.
- To learn more about other local government officials, visit <https://www.usa.gov/localgovernments> and choose your state.



# MEETING YOUR LEGISLATOR

The most effective way to communicate with your legislator is to schedule a meeting to talk face-to-face (or virtually, for the time being). While these personal visits are the most effective advocating tool, they also require the greatest amount of planning and time. Here are a few guidelines to help you plan a successful visit.

## ***How to schedule a meeting***

Once you identify your three federal representatives, look at their website for guidance on scheduling a meeting. Most offices have a webform for requesting a meeting, or you can call the office and ask to speak with the scheduler. Let the scheduler know you are a constituent. Ask for a meeting on a specific day. If you have the flexibility to accommodate the member's schedule, say so. Of course, Members of Congress are busy. If they are unavailable, the scheduler will ask if you want to meet with a staff member, and will identify one based on your issue. Call at least a week, if not two, in advance.

## ***Before the meeting***

Prepare effectively by identifying and practicing your story and explaining why the legislator should care about undergraduate research, your work and what is happening on campus at your institution. Learn any position your legislator might have on postsecondary education and/or university research. Check out any statements on their website. Follow your legislators on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media to get the most up-to-date information about policy stances. (Most members have links to their social media accounts on their websites.)



# MEETING YOUR LEGISLATOR (CONTINUED)

## ***Write down your priorities***

Prepare a written letter (or email) that you can send to the staffer recapping what you mentioned in your visit. The exercise will help you get your thoughts organized. Be sure to address why any proposed legislation is important to you, how it will affect you, your colleagues and peers, your students, your school, and your profession. When you send the email after the meeting, it will provide the legislator or staff with a written record of your visit, and establish you as a resource going forward. Refer to this guide and the Policy Agenda for specific talking points.

You may also want to share what is happening at your school. What are the current experiences of your students and staff? What are specific examples of how your policy requests would benefit students or your community? Stories, particularly those about individuals, elicit greater empathy than facts and statistics, can motivate those who hear them to take positive action, and lower audience members' resistance to new ideas.

## ***During the meeting***

Explain how current issues and/or proposed legislation will directly affect you. Share your prepared priorities. If the meeting is over the phone, acknowledge that it is difficult to read body language or other cues, and encourage the staff or representative to ask questions as you talk. Share statistics from your school or personal stories from students. Highlight successes and challenges. Ask them if they are working on anything you should know about. Always be on time and dress professionally. Remember you only have 10–30 minutes to meet with each legislator. Even if you disagree with your legislator's position or politics, be polite. Don't talk about elections—past or future. A staffer may ask you tough questions. That is their job. If you do not know the answer, tell them that you will look into the question and get back to them.



# MEETING YOUR LEGISLATOR (CONTINUED)

## ***Ending the Meeting***

Ask for a commitment. Your goal is to enlist your legislator’s support, so be as specific as possible. Ask the staffer direct questions such as “Will your boss support ongoing support for undergraduate research in federal research investments?” to elicit direct answers.

## ***After the Meeting***

After the meeting You should always follow up by thanking the legislator or staffer for their time in a follow up email and reiterating the points you discussed in the meeting. (The letter you prepared when you wrote down your priorities is perfect for this.)

Always offer to provide staffers and legislators with additional information on your work and school. You can also invite them to your building to see middle level education in action, for student presentations or to watch student presentations virtually.

Even if the meeting is virtual, you can tweet and post about your discussion. In a tweet or Instagram post, tag your representative, thank them for meeting with you, and add a picture of the meeting—even if it’s a computer screen. Also include any event or organizational hashtags. “Just had a great virtual meeting with the staff of @SenExample about the importance of supporting the middle grades at @myschool. Thanks!”



# SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT



Having a social media presence is an important part of advocacy— not only for your representatives, but for your entire school and community. Following your federal representatives before any meetings will help you get to know what they care about.

## General Tips

- **Consider video content.** Video can yield higher social media engagement. Keep your videos short (1-3 minutes), engaging, and to the point. Need help making a video? Perhaps consult the nearest middle schooler.
- **Tag your content.** Be sure to tag your legislator and use hashtags relevant to your intended audience.
- **Utilize students** (where appropriate and where consent has been given). Who better to tell the story of the importance of the middle grades than middle schoolers themselves? It could also be an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of civic engagement. Student perspectives are valuable to representatives and will help expand your impact. Just be sure to go through proper channels/gain necessary permissions.



# 10 TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL MEETING

- 1. Always schedule an appointment in advance.** Time is valuable in legislative offices. Contact the office at least one week, preferably two weeks, in advance to arrange a meeting. Due to the busy schedule of legislators, meetings are often assigned to staff.
- 2. Prepare thoroughly for your meeting.** Do your homework before meeting with your legislator's office. Find out about their policy interests and voting records.
- 3. Be clear at the start.** Introduce yourself by name, position, and school so that the staff know exactly who is on the call. Ask how much time they have to spend with you.
- 4. Encourage engagement virtually.** Encourage staff to interrupt or ask questions throughout the meeting.
- 5. Have a "message" and stick to it.** Successful meetings are narrow in scope. Stick to a few main talking points for your issue and make a specific request for action.
- 6. Bring it home.** Always connect your issue to your school or community.
- 7. Make a specific request.** Legislators expect you to make requests. It is important to make the request specific and direct.
- 8. Build a relationship with staff.** Staff are very influential in getting requests honored by elected officials. You should make every effort to establish strong relationships with staff and encourage them to use you as a resource in your area of expertise.
- 9. Follow-up.** Confirm the email address for all staff on the call, and then send thank you emails after your meeting to express your appreciation and to reinforce any commitments made during the meeting.
- 10. Stick to the facts.** Keep the discussion on policy, not politics. Remember, you want legislators to support your position regardless of their political affiliation.





# WRITING/EMAILING LEGISLATORS



Sometimes writing a legislator or office is the fastest way to convey your perspective – particularly when policy is moving quickly. This is also a great way to contact your state legislators. If you don't have an individual's email address, an email address or comment portal can usually be found on your lawmaker's website.

## ***Identify yourself as a constituent***

The most important thing to do is establish yourself as a constituent. Put your name or email and complete home address on the letter. Legislators will only feel obligated to respond to constituent correspondence, so it's important to establish a district connection. You can use the subject line in an email to clearly indicate this, e.g. "Constituent Meeting Request" or "Question from SCHOOL NAME Principal."

## ***Use proper forms of address***

Remember to address your lawmaker appropriately. Be sure to get their title correct such as Senator, Representative, Mayor, or Chairman/Chairwoman, etc.

***Be brief and simple*** Your letter should be one page. Make your request in the first paragraph. Do not feel the need to explain the issue in your letter. Make your message timely Do not procrastinate. Be aware of the legislative process and time your letter accordingly.

## ***State and repeat your position***

Make your position or request clear in the opening and closing of your letter. Be specific, such as asking for support or opposition to a bill or issue.

## ***Personalize your message***

A personal letter is much more effective than a form letter. Your message will have an impact. Connecting your issue to your personal situation will set your email above the rest in the inbox. If a sample letter is provided, incorporate your own words and personal perspective into the text.





# TALKING POINTS

“Speech is power: speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel.”





# WHY THE “MIDDLE GRADES?”

**AMLE defines middle level education as encompassing students of ages 10 to 14, and that generally includes grades 5 through 8, although varied patterns exist.**

**The middle school model, or a school specifically designed to meet these students needs, have been around for nearly a century. The concept is best articulated by AMLE’s foundational position paper, *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*.**

- While education has been historically divided into elementary and secondary, the middle grades deserve separate recognition because of the well-defined and unique nature of the students within this age group.
- The quality of students’ middle school experience substantially affects their overall sense of well-being and, in particular, their later chances for high school completion and post-secondary success.
- The research tells us that young adolescents thrive when they are provided with learning environments that are responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging.
- The middle grades are the most under addressed period within the educational system, with fewer investments in the middle grades than in early childhood or the high school to post-secondary transition.
- There is a documented, significant decline in youth engagement in school in the middle grades. Higher levels of academic engagement in fifth grade are followed by precipitous drops in sixth through ninth grade, and finally a level off in tenth through twelfth grade.
- International comparisons indicate that students in the U.S. do not start out behind students of other nations in mathematics and science, but that they fall behind by the end of the middle grades.

**Talking points should be used in conjunction with the AMLE National Policy Agenda for the Middle Grades: Member Version**





# WHO ARE “YOUNG ADOLESCENTS?”

**Middle schoolers are amazing humans. Their educators and caregivers have the privilege of watching them develop physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively as they discover new vistas, form new relationships, and explore their developing identity.**

**We have so much to benefit from knowing and understanding students’ perspectives on themselves, their education, and the world around them.**

- 10–15 year-olds are experiencing the most rapid, significant changes of their lives other than infancy.
- These students are developing physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively as they discover new vistas, form relationships with peers and adults, and explore their developing identity. During this time, students construct the attitudes, values, and dispositions that will form who they become as adults.
- Uniformity among this age group should never be assumed. Rather, developmental characteristics are generalized traits, and a variety of environmental, cultural, and biological factors contribute to differences between young adolescents.
- During this time, students are developing the ability to imagine the future and think ahead. They begin to make decisions based less on impulse and more on goals. Of all age groups, middle grades students are the most receptive to positive change following a career development intervention – more so than even high school students.
- From brain science to social emotional development, it is now obvious that not paying enough attention to middle grades misses the profound opportunity of early to mid-adolescent development.

**Need support preparing for a meeting? Specific talking points, research, and resources for each of the Policy Agenda’s seven priorities can be obtained by emailing [membercenter@amle.org](mailto:membercenter@amle.org).**





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

While this Toolkit provides a helpful starting point, we understand that you'll need more support to help us #FliptheScrip on middle school.

We've compiled a few helpful resources here. Please contact [membercenter@amle.org](mailto:membercenter@amle.org) with any questions or for additional requests/needs.

- **Developmental Characteristics of Young Adolescents Research Summary.** Offers a summary of the latest research on young adolescent development with implications for educators. [amle.org/YAD](https://amle.org/YAD)
- **The Successful Middle School Program.** Recognized as the best articulation of the middle school model, AMLE's SMS program also provides resources for educators including a helpful one-pager, glossary of terms, book study and PD materials, and bite-sized courses. [amle.org/SMS](https://amle.org/SMS)
- **Remaking Middle School Initiative.** Remaking Middle School is a multi-phase initiative, elevating the innovation that is present in middle schools across the country and soliciting national input on how we ensure all students thrive in, and grow from, their experience in the middle grades. [amle.org/RMS](https://amle.org/RMS)
- **Middle Level Education Professional Preparation.** The specialized professional preparation of teachers of young adolescents must be a high priority of teacher preparation programs. AMLE continues to be the leader in promoting responsive policies, practices and programs for young adolescents and their teachers. The current AMLE Standards were revised in 2022. [amle.org/teacherprep](https://amle.org/teacherprep)
- **Career Exploration Playbook.** Career exploration is a cornerstone of young adolescent development and is associated with both positive educational and employment outcomes, keeps students engaged in school, and helps them develop a better sense of self. [amle.org/playbook](https://amle.org/playbook)

