

# 10 Actions to Advocate for More Equitable Literacy Outcomes in Your Community

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## What is advocacy, and why is it important?

Advocacy is when anyone raises their voice about the issues they care about. It can range from small-scale activities to large coordinated efforts, and it can target one particular action or support broad and sweeping changes. In any scenario, your voice matters.

In education, advocacy is essential because it allows everyone to speak up for the policies and practices that dismantle the systemic barriers that prevent students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities from having equitable access to educational resources and opportunities.

Impactful advocacy relies on strong relationships, understanding relevant decisionmakers, and articulating a clear path forward. Advocacy can bridge research, data, and lived experiences to draw attention to inequities that disproportionately impact students from underserved backgrounds, advance evidencebased approaches, and compel decisionmakers to action.

But to accomplish these goals, where should you begin? And how can you ensure your advocacy advances high-quality, evidence-based reading instruction?

# Here are 10 advocacy actions you can take at the local and state levels:

## Local Advocacy:

**Advocates have an important role to play at their local level — within their school, district, and community.**

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### 1. Ask questions of your system leaders

Start by asking questions about the current policies and practices in your local school/district. This information will provide insight into where your advocacy will be most useful. For instance, consider asking:

- What instructional materials are being used by the school/district? Are these materials both evidencebased and reflective of student’s identities (i.e., are materials “balanced” and “authentic” in their portrayal of various cultures, ethnicities, religions, and abilities?)
- What assessments are used to evaluate students’ reading progress? Are they administered frequently enough to be used to monitor the progress of our students (~3x/year)?
- What is the school/district’s process to identify students who need additional support in their literacy development, and what interventions are available to them? Do all students have equitable access to these supports?
- How are students with disabilities and multilingual students getting the differentiated instruction and support they need to thrive?
- What professional development and job-embedded support are available to educators to learn about evidence-based instruction, understand and use assessment data, and meaningfully engage families?
- How are district/school leaders working alongside early child care providers?

### 2. Spread the word

Engage in conversations with those in your community to build momentum by:

- **Engaging your personal network** to share about the importance of high-quality, evidence-aligned reading instruction. Discussing this issue with peers can support mobilizing a larger group of advocates who share the same concerns and amplify the call for change. For instance, as part of their [“Raising Readers Together”](#) initiative, the Worcester Education Collaborative hosted a [“Lunch & Learn” webinar series](#) to raise awareness about reading performance in the district and discuss ways schools, family members, and the community can work together to increase student reading proficiency in Worcester.

Social media is also an essential platform and vehicle for digital organizing and advocacy efforts. EdTrust hosted a [Communications for Advocacy training](#) highlighting the different platforms to engage your network on social media.

- **Writing an op-ed** to spark public discussion and shape public opinion. Local media can amplify the importance of stronger, more equitable reading instruction and put pressure on decision-makers to act with urgency. For instance:
  - The co-founders of the Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence (BBC) in Montgomery County, Maryland [penned an op-ed](#) urging their district to better support students of color struggling to read at grade level, and their ongoing advocacy has been recently featured in news outlets [across the region](#).
  - Alongside partners, EdTrust-Midwest co-authored an [op-ed](#) in Detroit Free Press to support the state's proposed dyslexia legislation, which [ultimately passed](#) with bi-partisan support.

### 3. Develop resources to help you & others talk to your school and district leaders

Engaging with school and district leadership is a powerful strategy. This is because district leaders, alongside school board members, are responsible for key decisions that impact equitable literacy outcomes and can champion evidence-based literacy initiatives. For instance, district leaders are responsible for procuring ELA curricula, providing district-wide professional development opportunities, hiring literacy coaches, developing an early intervention support system, and establishing additional district-wide literacy supports (e.g., tutoring initiatives and summer programming).

Meanwhile, principals are uniquely responsible for operationalizing these policies in alignment with best practices. For instance, principals can adjust the school schedule to ensure students receive additional support and interventions several times per week, in small groups, and within the school day. Principals also lead the implementation of new literacy initiatives and can augment additional supports for their educators as needed. Principals also set the tone for continuous improvement, establish an expectation of high standards for all students, and support educators in meaningfully engaging parents and families.

For more information on relevant decisionmakers, see the Alliance for Resource Equity's "Advocating Across Government" [tools](#), which breaks down key decisionmakers' authority over various policies, practices, and resources across a range of dimensions that support students' literacy development, including access to [empowering, rigorous content](#), [diverse and qualified educators](#), [high-quality early learning opportunities](#), and a [positive, inviting school climate](#). Consider advocating to your school/district leadership by:

- **Producing a "State of the Student" resource** to provide a data-driven snapshot of reading performance in your district, and direct leaders to the specific areas for intervention and improvement. For example:
  - In 2023, [Parent Shield Fort Worth](#) released a ["Literacy is Freedom" report](#) to paint a clear picture of the literacy crisis in their community. The report summarizes qualitative data (their numerous

conversations with parents throughout the district), as well as quantitative data (a deep dive into assessment results) to illustrate the lack of accurate reporting of students' reading progress. The report also reviews their successful efforts to set up "Literacy Clinics" across the district, allowing families to gain a more accurate and actionable understanding of their child's reading level. In June 2024, the district announced they would change their Parent Portal and reporting. That October, Parent Shield launched a campaign for data transparency in reading assessment reporting, demanding that the district change its parent portal and report cards.

- **Developing messaging guidance with talking points** to outline your advocacy priorities. Messaging guidance provides clear, consistent, and well-organized talking points for yourself and for others. This document can help streamline communication with district and school leaders and anticipate common concerns and potential questions with thoughtful, well-informed responses.

## Tips to Craft an Impactful Advocacy Message

- **Identify your "influencer(s)."** To steer advocacy efforts in an impactful direction, advocates need to understand not only what they are advocating for, but also who they are advocating to. Before getting too deep into refining a message, first identify the key player(s) responsible for the policy, implementation, or practice change. From there, you can then understand these decision makers as your audience to develop a compelling message.
- **Know your audience.** While it may be tempting to label "everyone" as your audience, the more personalized you can make your message, the more likely it will be to have an impact. Once you've identified your specific audience, consider their values and what they care deeply about, and connect those priorities to your advocacy.
- **Make it personal.** Advocates should feel empowered to share their personal story. People respond to emotion and passion, so use it in your messaging! In other words, personal stories can be used alongside data and statistics to "show" (and not just "tell") why your audience should care about equitable and evidence-based literacy instruction, curriculum, assessments, and supports.
- **Keep it simple.** Your audience can't act on your message if they don't understand what you're asking of them. Your messaging should be simple and concise, and consistent over time and across coalitions to avoid confusing your targets.
- **Have a clear call to action.** Your advocacy will be most actionable when it concludes with a call to action that is clear, precise, and feasible. And remember, the specifics of which will depend on your audience's influence and decision-making power.

Check out the Alliance for Resource Equity's [Casemaking Deck resources](#) for more information on crafting an effective advocacy message.

## 4. Engage with your school board

School board meetings offer another direct platform to important decisionmakers in the district. School board members are elected representatives from the community and are partly responsible for evaluating and selecting curriculum materials, as well as formally overseeing curriculum adoption and implementation processes. School boards are also often responsible for making important resource allocation decisions, and helping to procure district-wide professional development materials.

Presenting or attending a school board meeting also helps build community awareness and hold school boards accountable to change, though advocates may also/instead wish to engage with individual school board members for a more detailed conversation about evidence-based reading approaches. Presenting at an upcoming meeting may also help educate your school board: As one long-time school board member [reflects](#), board members may not be aware of how evidence-based reading instruction can better support students' literacy development. As a result, board members may simply defer to seasoned district and school leaders who, in good faith, may be relying on ineffective approaches.

## 5. Host a community event

Hosting a community event, such as a forum or documentary screening, can bring community members together to voice concerns, share experiences, and discuss solutions in an asset-based manner. Consider hosting one of the following:

- **A data equity walk** for local members to discuss data from their own community. Together, participants engage in structured conversations about local education data to interpret trends, reflect on personal experience, and mobilize for action. This activity must be paired with high-quality facilitation to ensure participants can accurately interpret and contextualize the data by considering availability and access to broader resources. Check out EdTrust-West's [toolkit](#) for more information, tips, and a "data equity walk" facilitation guide.
- **Screening of "The Right to Read" documentary** to help your community learn about the literacy crisis. Across the country, many advocates have organized community screenings to kickoff or grow their advocacy efforts. For instance, EdTrust-New York hosted a screening, followed by a [panel discussion](#) with local education leaders to discuss strategies for improving reading outcomes at the city and state levels, which laid the groundwork for a [statewide advocacy campaign](#) with partners across the state. Check out the [Screening Toolkit](#) for more information about hosting a screening, as well as the Film Discussion Guide ([English](#) and [Spanish](#)) and the [NAACP Discussion Guide](#).
- **Literacy Community Forum** to spur your community to action. For instance:
  - The Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity & Excellence hosted a "Getting Reading Right, NOW!" community forum, which brought together more than 800 residents in Montgomery County, Maryland. The forum [shared](#) data points, advocacy priorities, and testimonies in both English and Spanish, and focused on the additional resources and targeted interventions needed to support literacy outcomes in the district.

- In 2023, Parent Shield Fort Worth [held an event](#) outside a local library to release 69 balloons, representing the 69% of students in Fort Worth not reading at grade level and symbolize hopes that the city would no longer experience low literacy rates. This powerful event got the attention of the Mayor, who declared a “literacy emergency” the next day and called upon a “community wide effort” to raise literacy awareness.
- After EdTrust in Massachusetts conducted a [statewide parent poll](#) on literacy, they hosted a [community conversation](#) to react to the poll findings.

## 6. Look beyond your own district for support

There is already a strong advocacy movement for stronger, more equitable literacy instruction across the country. These broader coalitions, networks, and campaigns can help connect local advocates to a broader movement that provides valuable peer-to-peer support, amplify best practices, share additional resources, and discuss specific tactics and strategies to implement at the local level. For instance, advocates can get involved in existing statewide campaigns (e.g. EdTrust-New York’s [The New York Campaign for Early Literacy](#)), and/or join local or state chapters of national organizations (e.g., [Decoding Dyslexia](#), [The Reading League](#) chapters). Advocates can also look across the country to get involved via national coalitions (e.g. the [Diverse Books for All Coalition](#)), virtual workshops (e.g., [Dyslexia Alliance for Black Children’s](#) monthly workshops), and listen to a range of podcasts (e.g., [Black & Dyslexic](#) podcast) that may be aligned to specific advocacy interests.

### State-Level Advocacy:

**Advocating at the state-level calls upon state officials and leaders to drive systemic change across the state.**

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## 7. Engage with your state legislators

State legislators play a fundamental role in developing, amending, and funding policies that can advance equitable literacy outcomes for every student in the state. As such, there are many opportunities to engage with your state legislators to advance equitable systemic change, including:

- **Send a letter and/or call your representative expressing support for proposed literacy legislation** (or creating a sample letter or script for others to use). This type of advocacy directly communicates to your representative that you care about this issue, and can influence your legislators’ decisions, especially when they hear the same messages from many of their constituents. EdTrust-Midwest developed a [toolkit for advocates to contact their state legislators](#), adapted to a parent, child, or Michigan citizen perspective, as well as a [legislator look-up tool](#) identifies elected officials across the country, how to contact them, and committees they serve on.
- **Testify at a hearing** to share your perspective directly with lawmakers, and most state legislature websites have a calendar or schedule of hearings, searchable by date, committee, or topic, as well as a newsletter announcing upcoming hearings. Testifying – either by submitting written testimony or speaking at the

hearing as a witness – establishes your perspective as part of the official public record and provides lawmakers with firsthand perspectives that can highlight the need for stronger, more equitable literacy instruction. For over six years, EdTrust-Midwest [testified](#) at [multiple hearings](#) (and [helped advocates to do the same](#)) to create a better system to identify and support students with dyslexia throughout the state. [Michigan’s Reading For All Legislation](#) was passed in September 2024. Additionally, submitting joint testimony with partners can help communicate a shared point of view and aligned recommendations. For example, EdTrust in Texas recently joined over 25 organizations to submit [joint testimony](#) for a Senate interim hearing to improve the state’s early literacy efforts.

## 8. Secure state-level champions

In addition to engaging with your own representative(s), identifying “champions” at the state level allows advocates to work with leaders who have the influence to bring visibility to the issue of strong and equitable literacy instruction, rally support from their peers, and sustain momentum in the face of political opposition.

For example, EdTrust-Midwest and coalition partners advanced “a full court press” through the summer months of 2024 to support the “Reading for All” legislative package. Notably, the coalition secured [the support of the Michigan Speaker of the House](#) and [the vote](#) occurred several months ahead of schedule in the few days that the legislature was in session that month. In this way, the Speaker was a powerful “champion” to the cause - using his authority to prioritize this vote over many other competing priorities. Note that champions may not only be at the legislative level: EdTrust in Massachusetts hosted [a community conversation](#) about literacy with both a state representative and their Lieutenant Governor.

## 9. Engage with your State Board of Education

In many states, the State Board of Education shares responsibilities with the legislature. For example, state boards may be responsible for developing and maintaining standards (educator preparation standards, academic standards, and/or educator licensure standards) and may also be responsible for creating and/or maintaining a list of “approved” curricular materials and diagnostic and screening instruments. Consider advocating to your State Board members by:

- **Attending public board meetings** to stay updated on proposed changes to policy, standards, and regulations. Like state legislative hearings, many state boards offer opportunities for public testimony during these meetings, allowing advocates to share their perspectives, concerns, and data-driven recommendations.
- **Providing written feedback during public comment periods.** State boards often post opportunities for open comment periods when considering changes. Much like submitting testimony, advocates can use this opportunity to submit equity-advancing suggestions and share research on evidence-based literacy practices.
- **Building individual relationships with board members** to discuss specific concerns and propose actionable solutions.



## 10. Call upon your state education agency to provide meaningful support to local education agencies

State education agencies are responsible for implementing state legislation and can offer meaningful support to schools and districts by producing guidance to help leaders translate laws and regulations into coherent, actionable strategies. For instance, education agencies can post guidance that includes evaluation criteria for curricular material selection, playbooks to support a transition to high-quality, evidence-based curricular materials, and professional learning opportunities. State education agencies also oversee and maintain specific grant programs that incentivize specific state priorities. Advocates can engage with their state agency by:

- **Releasing Call to Action reports.** EdTrust in Massachusetts released a [resource](#) outlining the state's literacy crisis and how it impacts underserved students. EdTrust New York's "[Call to Action: The State of Early Literacy in New York](#)" paints a clear and urgent picture of early literacy in the state, outlining on-the-ground perspectives of parents, teachers, and students, major obstacles to advancing more evidence-based approaches, and clear policy opportunities to advance more equitable literacy outcomes. These types of resources can also contextualize data trends with information on broader resources that impact students' literacy development, such as strong educators, tutoring initiatives, and early education opportunities.
- **Participating in advisory committees.** Many state departments of education have existing committees to garner perspectives of advocates and practitioners. Becoming involved in these committees help advocates stay informed about potential changes and weigh in with their perspectives. This allows advocates to directly voice additional considerations and suggestions to state officials.
- **Acting as a watchdog for additional stakeholder engagement opportunities.** Advocates have an important role in ensuring their state engages with diverse groups to continuously improve their literacy efforts. Advocates can establish an expectation that these engagement opportunities are conducted in a meaningful, culturally relevant manner and explicitly consider the perspectives of families, educators, literacy coaches, and system leaders who predominantly serve students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual students.
- **Setting up meetings to seek clarification and communicate advocacy priorities.** These meetings can provide advocates an opportunity to ask questions to seek clarification, commend the state on any ongoing progress, and share specific concerns. These meetings can also help advocates cultivate an ongoing relationship with their state Department, which over time, can help establish advocates as "friends" in the work.