



How to Pass a Safe School Siting Policy



School Siting is in the best interests of our children and teachers. It saves the school district from burdensome expensive testing or cleaning up contamination.

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1. Conduct a Strategic Analysis

If you are conducting a campaign to pass a Safe School Siting Policy on the School District, city, county or statewide level, it is helpful to first conduct a strategic analysis of the political climate and possible allies. Which officials are likely to sponsor the policy and be strong champions? Which officials have the power to make the decision? Does the policy have to go through a committee before it is voted on by the full political body?

To achieve your goals, you must convince the majority of the political body that the policy should be approved. Always keep in mind that your primary targets are those in power who make the decisions.

You can do a “power map” of the School District, City or County governing body, or state legislature, to determine how to pass the policy. The power mapping tool helps you and your group determine how to influence decision-makers and entails these four basic steps.

A. Find out what entity has the power to make decisions. Find out the process for adopting the policy. Which committees, if any, does it have to go through and who is the Committee Chair and which Committee members are in the majority party? Who are the political leaders of the governing body that decide which policies are voted on and approved?

B. Determine the best political targets. Examine the politics of the governing body on similar issues, such as environmental and health issues to determine who is likely to support the reform, oppose it, or remain undecided.

Who are the most likely champions to sponsor the policy and advocate for its passage? Who consistently votes in favor of environmental initiatives? Elected officials are also called representatives, or depending on the governing body,

legislators, council members or board members. You will need to carefully choose the elected official who will champion your policy and be certain that you have organized support before you approach him or her. Representatives of environmental advocacy groups and teacher unions are often good sources of information.

C. Determine which individuals or institutions are likely to influence your targets. Policymakers are influenced by a variety of forces. As elected or appointed officials, they must respond to their constituents and supporters to retain their position. The following are possible sources of influence: other policymakers; opinion leaders in the community; leaders of parent, student, school, environmental, labor and health groups; and the media.

Research the opposition within the governing body and also from possible groups. Who may oppose the proposal based on their past poor environmental record? Are there any groups that may oppose the proposal? Try to anticipate what their arguments might be and address them in fact sheets and educational materials on the policy.

For example, if you're looking at similar policies passed, such as the city council passed an ordinance requiring schools to test for lead paint on walls and remediate any problems that would be a good starting place for clues on how to draft the policy but also on what went down in the political fight for that ordinance.

D. Determine whom among those who influence the targeted policymakers, you and your group can influence and communicate with to build support. Perhaps you have great access to the local or state PTA or environmental groups but limited access to the teachers union. However, maybe a personal friend knows the staff at the teachers union or the local legislator and can help set up a meeting.

2. Network and Learn from Allies

You can learn how other groups conducted successful campaigns by contacting them and use their “lessons learned” to effectively map out your campaign strategy plan.

While CHEJ can provide you with sample policies, resources and tips, one of the best ways to find out how to pass a policy is to talk with groups that have done it successfully. CHEJ is working with groups around the country. You can get group contacts from the CHEJ’s Children’s Environmental Health Program Campaign Coordinator at 703-237-2249 x21.

You can email a group leader and set up a phone interview to find out how their policy was developed and passed. You can also ask them for sample fact sheets, alerts and news releases. Networking with experienced groups will provide valuable information as you develop your campaign strategy to pass a policy.

You can also join CHEJ’s national network of groups working at the local, state and federal level. The network includes national groups, such as Natural Resource Defense Council and PTA, state groups such as Rhode Island Legal Services and local groups such as Clean Schools Initiative in Texas. CHEJ can organize conference calls to enable groups to exchange information and learn from each other. Contact CHEJ’s CEHP Campaign Coordinator at 703-237-2249 x21 for more information.

3. Don’t Reinvent the Wheel: Review Policies

Reviewing model policies is an important first step when drafting your proposal. Depending on the type of governing body, the policy may be a School District, City or County Resolution or Local Ordinance, or a City Council or State Legislature bill or legislation.

Review policies to find out the various ways you can structure the policy, including definitions, goals, and how the policy will be implemented.

Using the sample policies you can get from CHEJ, you can cut and paste together the sections that best meet your group’s policy goal. If you are unsure about which approach to take, you can contact the agency or group and ask them specific questions on how effective it has been during implementation. Find out if there is any existing state or local regulations on school siting and fully understand the regulatory gaps.

Remember that the proposed policy will most likely undergo changes before it is passed and compromises may have to be made as the policy-makers review it and try to deal with any opposition. **So, craft a policy that is very strong and can withstand some changes or amendments.** Ask for more than you want in the policy and have some elements in mind that you and your group are ready to part with or could live without. You’ll never get the policy that you dream of as compromises are inevitable in the political process, so be prepared. But don’t give up things too soon, or the end product will be disappointing. Big compromises (e.g. a 5,000 foot buffer instead of 8,000 feet) should come at the end of the process when there’s more certainty in getting it passed without more major cuts.

Using existing policies, you can write a proposed Safe School Siting Policy to bring to a representative for sponsorship. Alternatively, you can gather the best one or two policies and ask the representative and his or her staff to draft the policy based on these documents.

It is helpful to write an explanatory *Summary Memo or Fact Sheet* that provides an outline of the policy, explains how it will protect children, addresses any economic impact concerns, describes similar policies that have been successfully implemented, and lists supporting groups.

One great resource for the Summary Memo is the national set of principles. CHEJ and partner groups have *Principles for Safe School Siting* which provides a comprehensive justification for this important policy. (See Principles at www.chej.org)

4. Reach Out to Groups and Build Support

Early in the campaign, you want to reach out to likely allies and ask for their support. Your goal is to have groups endorse (support) the proposed policy and take action. Groups can show their support by sending legislators an organizational Memo of Support, speaking at a public hearing, attending meetings with representatives, participating in a news conferences, and activating their members to call representatives as needed.

Eventually, you and your group want to form a coalition of key, committed activists and organizational leaders that would contribute to the development of the policy and organize the campaign to pass the policy. This coalition can be coordinated by a core group of leaders who will develop and implement the campaign strategy. You need to work with other groups because if you are on your own, you are likely to be overwhelmed by the effort, and it takes people power to achieve change on the district, county or state level.

It is useful to provide groups with a one page Fact Sheet that describes the policy proposal and explains why it is beneficial. When you contact groups, ask what the process is for their group to consider endorsing the proposal. They may request that you come to their monthly meeting or to a committee meeting. Groups also may want to have input on the proposal, and this level of involvement is important and beneficial. If there is interest, you could have a meeting with group representatives to discuss any needed changes on the proposal. Be on the look-out for events and other opportunities with groups who may support your

policy. Attend meetings, distribute the Fact Sheet and ask groups to do a Memo of Support. Sit down with as many people as possible and listen to their opinions on who to approach in the governing body, especially groups that have done advocacy with the policy-making body in the past.

Your goal is to organize substantial support among organizations in the region. When you visit legislators, try to have a “team” of group leaders to show diversity and strong support. Provide the legislators with the group Memos of Support and a Memo listing all the supporting groups, politicians and community leaders.

Engage any groups that might oppose or have concerns about a siting policy to understand their position and get feedback well in advance of the legislative session. This could include the staff of school districts and school board associations.

First, it is a good idea to identify key supporters that will benefit your campaign efforts. The broader coalition of groups you have, the more political strength your group will have in the campaign. It is worth the time on the front end of a campaign to visit key group leaders and find out if they can support the campaign. They have powerful voices, connections and sway with constituents that your group may not have. Plus, once you find a legislative champion for your policy, they will greatly appreciate having that broad network of supporters which will help get their colleagues on board.

The following is a list of possible supporters you could contact.

School Groups: Contact the local and/or state PTA, PTO, other school-based parent groups, such as special needs parent groups, and student groups.

School District Staff: Contact school district staff responsible for district policies if you are considering a district-wide policy proposal, and ask to

meet with them. It is important that they feel they are part of the policy design process. Attend the meeting as a group that represents the community with all those impacted if possible, including teachers, parents and students. Describe the problem and provide a draft policy for their comment. Ask them to work with your coalition to develop and pass a protective policy.

Constituents: Elected representatives respond to the concerns of their constituents. Early in the campaign, reach out to constituents—the people who live in the potential sponsor’s district. It is always helpful to invite active and articulate constituents to meetings to show legislators there is strong, local support. Also, once the policy is introduced, ask people to contact their elected official through alerts and outreach calls. You also may need to target calls and letters to the sponsoring representative or a Committee Chair where the policy is pending.

Health and Environmental Health Groups: Seek out and get on the agenda of health and environmental health advocacy groups in your area. Local, regional and statewide environmental groups are obvious potential allies. Some others include women and children’s health, asthma and breast cancer groups, as well as American Lung Association Chapters, School Nurses or Nursing Associations. Also, you could contact any school nurse or doctor in the area. For the organizations, start by identifying state or local chapters of national groups that support siting policies. Focus on influential advocacy groups.

Teacher Unions: Teacher unions, and their health and safety committees, may be interested in supporting the policy. Contact the local teachers union, and if appropriate, state teachers union for support. Find out if there is a regional Labor Council in your area which may have a teacher’s union representative, and ask for their support. Find out if there is a Council on Occupational Safety & Health (COSHs) in your state and

contact them for support. COSHs are regional or statewide coalitions of local unions concerned about worker safety and health issues and they often have teacher unions as members. Seek out and get on their agenda and present some examples of how a safe siting policy will benefit all school employees.

Community Groups: Community groups working on local environmental issues may be interested in joining your campaign because they understand the need to protect people from toxic exposures.

Religious Groups: Faith-based leaders of churches and religious groups may be supportive, especially if they have committees working on community health or environmental stewardship issues.

5. Find a Legislative Sponsor

Early in the campaign, it is a good idea to visit the School Board, City or County governing body or State Legislature and become friendly with the key leaders and their staff. Introduce yourself, your group and your issue. Ask questions about procedures and processes to pass a policy, including committees and public hearings.

Then, once you’ve gathered organizational support, develop a policy and supporting materials, select your first choice for a sponsor, and schedule a meeting with your potential sponsor. It is important that you have a “team” of people come to the meeting who will show strong local support, such as up to four health, environmental, community or labor leaders and at least one or two constituents. Make sure you have copies of the policy, Summary Memo and Memos of Support for the representative and his/her staff.

Plan the meeting agenda and select someone to facilitate the meeting. Make sure you develop “talking points” so you and others are prepared to take turns raising all the key points on why this policy is

important and beneficial, and describe how it has strong local support. At the end of the meeting, ask the representative to officially sponsor the proposal. The representative may want to review it and respond at a later date. If they say no, thank them and move on to the next potential sponsor.

Keep in mind that you want to approach potential sponsors who will be committed and have the political power to organize for its passage. This is important to your success in getting a policy passed. If you find someone who is eager to work on the issue, yet is new and has little experience, or is isolated and possibly held in low regard by their colleagues, the chances for passage are slim. Relationships matter a lot, so the reputation of your champion is important. If you have a chance to have a senior policymaker champion your policy, such as the Mayor's office, Majority Leader, Committee Chair, Board President, etc. contact them first. It may be a little more work, but well worth the effort to have the political clout to pass the policy and have seasoned staff to work with who know how to move things through tough committees and work with any opposition.

6. Develop and Implement Your Campaign Strategy

Plan a campaign strategy and timeline so your group and the core team coordinating the coalition can figure out work assignments, keep momentum going and effectively follow through on activities.

Once you have found a sponsor, it is important to develop a campaign plan with the sponsor on activities that will help pass the policy. You will need to raise awareness and educate policymakers about school siting issues and provide examples of problems in their region or around the state.

Here are some activities that could be included in your campaign strategy plan.

Conduct a Study or Survey: Your group or the sponsor could conduct a survey of your school district, county or state to highlight problems where polluting facilities or toxic sites are near schools or day care centers. For a statewide study, you could utilize GIS mapping to map all the Superfund or brownfield toxic sites and show their proximity to schools. A media event to release the study would be a great way to kick-off your campaign and graphically show the problem. A statewide study will take time and resources. Perhaps you can find an interested teacher with students or volunteers that are experienced in using GIS mapping software. You can often obtain the mapping information on where schools and toxic sites are located from the state education and environmental agencies. If you have trouble getting the information, contact your local or state legislator to see if they can help you obtain it.

Meet with the School District: If it is a local policy, ask to meet with the key staff in the School District to begin the education process on why a Safe School Siting Policy is important. Be prepared to respond to any technical or implementation concerns they may have. If you don't have an answer to a question, let them know you will research it and get back to them with a response.

It is key to meet with school officials (school board and school district) both top and bottom. You should meet with the lead decision-makers, but you also need to pay attention to staff at lower levels and attempt to address their concerns. There could be one staffperson who just hates your policy and is aggressively advocating against it until you address their concerns.

Distribute Legislative Information Packet: Develop a legislative packet of basic information which describes why a Safe School Siting policy is needed. It could include a one page Fact Sheet on the problem and a one page Fact Sheet on the proposed policy, CHEJ's Principles, organizational letters of support from groups, doctors, teachers,

students and others, newspaper articles and expert testimony, if a hearing was held on the issue.

Hold a News Conference: The sponsor and your coalition can hold a news conference to announce the introduction of the Safe School Siting Policy, its passage through a committee, and its final approval.

Hold a Public Hearing: The sponsor could hold a public hearing to educate people about the issue, and get input from constituents, groups and schools. You can recruit people to speak in support of the policy. Identify key groups and individuals to provide expert testimony and personal stories. Two weeks before the hearing, contact your speakers and make sure they know the time, location, and date of the hearing. Talk with each speaker about what they are going to discuss and provide them with fact sheets on the issue. Make sure every speaker asks for the same Safe School Siting goals outlined in your policy proposal.

Meet with Policymakers: On the state or county level, the policy may have to go through a Committee, such as an Environmental Committee or a Governmental Operations Committee. As soon as you know which committee, start to schedule meetings with the appropriate Committee members to ask for their support before it comes up for a vote. Meeting with members early in the process is extremely helpful as you can address any concerns they may have, and inform them of the benefits and strong public support.

The most important meetings you will have are with the opposition and your coalition representatives need to be at those meetings unless your champion has some very special relationship with them (e.g. roomed together in college). If you don't try to find compromises with the opposition, they can squash your policy – get it stuck in a terrible committee, pulled from the calendar, convince policymakers to oppose it, etc. Think creatively about ways to address concerns from

opposition. Sometimes it takes a few meetings to get to the heart of their concerns and get them to come up with alternatives rather than “we can't live with your bill in any form”.

Working with the Sponsor: Work very closely with your sponsor's staff. When legislative staff say that they're taking care of things, remember that they are taking care of a hundred other unrelated things too. You need to build a relationship where you're in communication a lot and can check in on their tasks and let them off load some to you if appropriate. You need to find a way to keep them on top of your Safe School Siting policy as a priority without being too annoying. The more in-person time with staff, the better – dropping by can be a good thing, especially when you can “walk & talk” with them as they go to their next meeting or go on coffee run with them.

Be ready for the hurry-up/slow-down cycle of the legislature. When staffers email or call with “urgent” questions about your policy that you may think are random, inconsequential or just not urgent, you need to respect their request and respond ASAP. Sometimes policies get hung up on what may seem like a bizarre question that you've never heard posed in public. It could have been raised privately between the mayor and your sponsor in a hallway chat. You need to treat it as a priority and be available to research a good answer (or have another coalition member do it).

Be prepared to brief and write testimony for your champion. They may be very supportive but are so busy that they completely forget important details of your policy, even after you've been through them many times. Don't assume that your champion's staffers are taking care of this. Short question/answer documents help. Similarly, when amendments have been agreed to, it is best to capture them in a memo right away with bullet form summaries (not the tedious pages of line item edits).

Tally up the Votes: You will need to work with

the sponsor to tally up the votes before the policy comes up in Committee for a vote, and when it comes to the floor for a vote by the full Board, Council or Legislature. Check in with Committee members and other representatives (especially in the majority party) to see where they stand and keep an ongoing tally of how many votes you need to win. Be responsive to questions and concerns and bring them the information or experts who can provide the answers.

If you have a key representative who is hostile or neutral, be proactive and have constituents and groups contact them. Prepare rebuttals to any opposition arguments and find out who has been visiting the representative from the opposing side. If a Committee Chair or key representative is organizing against the policy, you may need to focus on alerting his or her constituents. You could organize a letter-writing campaign in their district.

Media Strategy: Think about a pre-vote media strategy to help generate public support and alert policymakers. Does an upcoming event or a new environmental or health report provide an opportunity for a press event? Will this awaken opposition or will it have the positive effect of pressuring representatives to vote in your favor? Can you get a meeting with a sympathetic editorial board of your local paper and ask them to do an Editorial in support of the policy? Can supporters write Letters to the Editor urging the public to support the policy? Are there any siting situations or problem schools with ongoing toxic exposures which can be linked to the policy?

You will also want to work with the sponsor on a News Release and media event plan if the policy passes. After the vote, groups need to congratulate the elected officials who showed leadership by taking action to protect children, “green” new schools in the city, county or state with the new Safe School Siting Policy.

Frame the issue as a win/win for everyone. Safe

School Siting is in the best interests of our children and teachers. It saves the school district from burdensome expensive testing or cleaning up contamination. It prevents children from being exposed to polluted soil, air or water. It ensures children and school employees are in a safe school environment where health is a priority.

CHEJ believes that any standard used for evaluating or cleaning up candidate school sites should be the most stringent levels in effect for any contaminants found at the site, which is residential unrestricted use. No matter how obnoxious the opposition gets, don't engage in negative or personal attacks as it can tarnish your groups' image and ultimately backfire. It's one thing to sharply criticize an entity (e.g. The Happytrails School District doesn't seem to mind corralling their students in toxic schools just to save a buck.... But healthy schools vs. funds for new books is a false choice) and quite another to personally attack a school or elected official and call them names. This is an important point for interns and volunteers to understand.

7. Sample Campaign Timeline

Here is a suggested timeline to follow for a School Board, City or County Safe School Siting policy. The campaign will probably be longer for a state policy.

Month 1

Step 1: Do a strategic analysis.

Step 2: Research policies, your governing body and possible opposition. Network with groups that have passed policies.

Step 3: Contact groups and request their support. Develop a coalition of groups and a core team.

Step 4: Develop a Campaign Strategy Plan and Timeline.

Step 5: Visit the governing body (School Board, City Council or State Legislature) and become friendly with the staff.

Month 2

- Step 1: Meet with the targeted official and ask them to sponsor the policy.**
- Step 2: Develop a campaign plan with the sponsor.**
- Step 3: Meet with staff in the School District or key policymakers.**
- Step 4: Keep meeting with groups and request their support.**
- Step 5. Educate the public and policymakers with a news conference or public hearing.**

Month 3

- Step 1: Meet with Committee members and other key policymakers.**
- Step 2: Educate the public and policymakers with a news conference, public meeting, fact sheets, letters to the editor or editorial.**
- Step 3: Develop a pre-vote strategy to address any opposition.**
- Step 4: Tally up the votes before the policy comes up for a vote.**
- Step 5: Right before the vote, again contact any targeted policymakers.**
- Step 6: Celebrate the passage of your Safe School Siting Policy! Hold a news conference or issue a news release.**

Written by Anne Rabe, CHEJ Be Safe Campaign, 2012. This memo was based on information gathered from local and state legislative campaigns, and the recommendations of Christine Ackerson of Clean Schools Initiative in Texas and Diane Bailey of Natural Resource Defense Council in California.