

Political Action: What, Why, Who, When, Where, & How

The 2008-2009 school year has been a fast-paced, nail-biting time of fear and uncertainty with regard to our state and national economies and, consequently, to the funding that makes the wheels of education spin. Throughout the past several months the survival of fundamental programming for our students has been in jeopardy—creating a dark cloud of uncertainty for the staff that service these programs as well. How has the VCTA addressed these uncertainties? The answer can be found within political action efforts at the local, state and national levels. The allocation of federal stimulus aid, the reinstatement of New York State’s education funds originally eliminated from the governor’s early budget proposals, and the reduction in the number of programming and staff cuts here at Valley Central, are all a consequence of collaborative efforts to put children center. The organizational effectiveness of NYSUT and the AFT often make monumental efforts to protect and enhance education seem simple, uneventful and certain. In economic times such as this, however, it is important that all members recognize the time, effort and dedication that must be committed to political action each year for this organizational effectiveness to exist.

What is political action and why is it necessary? Political action represents all of the VCTA’s organized efforts to support the goals of education. These efforts provide our profession with the political influence necessary to protect and improve education, healthcare and workers' rights. Lobbying, a specific component of political action, is direct communication that is intended to influence the views and votes of public officials and other constituents who have the power/authority to impact our collective goals. As demonstrated by our May 3, 2003 March for Public Education Rally in Albany, political action helps to ensure that school districts and colleges receive the state aid necessary to provide quality educational services to our youth (see *VC Echoes, April 2003, March for Public Education, p. 1*). More recent lobbying efforts have resulted in the 2009 Federal Stimulus Package that granted NYS a temporary reprieve by reducing the projected number of cuts to staff and programming that economists had originally forecasted (see *VC Echoes, April 2009, In the News..., p. 5*). Political action is completely funded through the voluntary VOTE-COPE contributions of members. Union dues are not used for these initiatives. To learn more about VOTE-COPE, visit the VCTA’s website at www.vcta.net.

Who should be involved in political action? Effective political action efforts on behalf of children and public education must involve many constituencies to be effective. Teachers cannot and do not stand alone in these efforts to put and keep children center. VCTA members, including secretaries, paraprofessionals and teachers, must work collaboratively with other district personnel such as administration, BOE members, maintenance/custodial workers and nutritional staff to be optimally effective with our mission. Concerned parents and parent organizations such as PTAs and booster clubs also have a vested interest in the quality of our children’s education. A primary goal of each group and each member within these groups should be to make our elected officials our most passionate education stakeholders through our lobbying and other political action efforts.

When and where does political action take place? Political action is an ongoing activity and takes place at four interconnected levels: Local, State, National and International. At the **local level** members can involve themselves in building, district and community initiatives to represent the needs of our students, community and colleagues. This can include involvement in interviews to ensure employee quality, as well as the endorsement of school budgets, BOE candidates and

even county legislators that are supportive of public education, labor and healthcare issues. At the **state level**, local presidents and other union delegates make endorsement recommendations to the NYSUT Board of Directors regarding NYS Senate and Assembly candidates. The NYSUT Legislative Department communicates with all elected Senate and Assembly members throughout the year regarding legislation that supports and/or opposes NYSUT's mission. NYSUT's political agenda is proposed and ratified each year by local delegates at the Annual Representative Assembly. The NYSUT Legislative Department is also in constant communication with the SED/Commissioner of Education, the Board of Regents and the Governor. Visit [About NYSUT's Legislative Action](#) at www.nysut.org to learn more about this department. At the **national level**, the same democratic process for the endorsement of members of the US Senate, the US House of Representatives and the President of the United States takes place. NYSUT, AFT and NEA leaders lobby these elected officials to promote our pro-child, pro-labor and pro-health care legislative agenda. At the **international level**, NYSUT's social justice agenda is primary. In the same manner that unions have affected positive change in the US with regard to health, safety and equality of opportunities, NYSUT believes that these basic human/civil rights should be promoted throughout the world. For example, our international support of fair trade laws and our opposition to child-labor have had a direct impact on how foreign businesses treat their most fragile and needy workers. Lee Cutler, NYSUT's Secretary-Treasurer, presented a definition of social justice for labor as agreed upon by AFT, NEA and NYSUT delegates at a recent Social Justice Summit (*New York Teacher, January 20, 2009*).

- *[A social justice agenda] promotes equal access to society's opportunities, thereby empowering people to have choices and control over their own destiny.*
 - *This agenda stems from the belief that injustice and oppression in other communities and nations does directly impact members of the labor movement.*
 - *The premise behind this agenda is that a socially just world is one which affords individuals and groups fair treatment and an impartial share of the benefits of society.*
 - *This agenda keeps in mind that a fundamental responsibility of labor leaders is to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and fight to ensure that every individual enjoys basic human rights.*
- A social justice agenda is more than band-aid charity; instead, it is a strategy that, properly implemented, transforms society.*

How does political action take place? At the local level, VCTA members and other concerned stakeholders continually lobby management and members of the BOE regarding initiatives, programs, staffing and funding that are crucial to educational success and improvement. In order to create a local base of support and promote faith in the integrity of the union, it is important that local residents hear from members throughout the entire school year. Effective outreach has included the publication and promotion of the multitude of committees, activities and fundraisers that are supported or initiated by members. Leaders do not assume that all members are on board with the union's agenda. Elections/Political Action chairs are appointed to share the union's ideals. These chairs, along with union officers, continually reach out to the general membership throughout the year. Educating our own members is the key to solidarity of purpose; solidarity is the key to success. The VCTA's [Legislative Action](#) page is a guide to "who's who" in the political arena. This page links directly to [NYSUT's Contact Your Elected Officials](#) site. The VCTA's periodic email reminders direct members to these sites for the purpose of sending online letters/faxes to elected officials that promote our education, labor, health care and

social justice agendas.

NYSUT Action Alerts are forwarded to the entire membership. These alerts send a powerful message of solidarity to our elected officials. NYSUT members, however, are not the only stakeholders that should participate in Action Alerts. School administrators, school board members, parents and other community members, and especially our friends and relatives should be encouraged to respond to Alerts that put children center.

At the local level, it is also important to participate in regional meetings for networking purposes. Orange County Teacher Association, Central Labor Council and Election District meetings are some of the regional forums attended by the VCTA. At election time, phone-banking and labor walks for NYSUT endorsed candidates are annual activities. Letters must be written and mailed to NYSUT and other union members residing within our borders that encourage positive participation in local, state and national elections.

At the state and national levels, our voluntary VOTE-COPE resources support lobbying efforts such as the Committee of 100. The Committee of 100, as it was originally called, is now a committee of hundreds of active and retired members representing teachers, secretaries, paraprofessionals and other support staff, health care workers and any other locals affiliated with NYSUT. These political action representatives attend two annual lobbying sessions in Albany, generally during the months of March and May, to carry our message of solidarity to elected officials. At these meetings it is important to encourage elected officials to feel ownership for public education services. Extensive planning and strategy are necessary for successful lobbying. It is important to select members who will support NYSUT's mission and remain focused on that message throughout each lobbying session. When elected officials are not in agreement with NYSUT's position, it is important that members ask why they do not support the issue. By knowing our elected officials' views, we can determine what criteria they have used in adopting their opposing point of view. By learning more about these officials, our lobbying groups can develop strategies to encourage open-minded discussion regarding our message/agenda. Because officials can change their minds, even on the senate or assembly floors, it is important that our political action representatives deliver a strong message to ensure that unfavorable changes do not occur at the last minute. Regardless of whether our lobbying efforts have resulted in the success that we desire, it is important that we demonstrate an appreciation for the time these elected officials have given to public education and the children of New York State.

Political Action is a monumental and unending task. Without political action efforts, funding for public education would be in jeopardy, programs would be cut and workers' rights would turn regressive rather than progressive. Although lobbying may seem like a daunting task to the average member, basic political action is generally very easy. Individual political action can be as simple as attending a meeting or rally for a just cause, sending a fax to elected officials that encourages support of important legislation, making phone calls or stuffing envelopes at election time, educating friends and family about the realities of public education, voting and ensuring that our friends and family members vote.

Ninety-seven percent of NYS school budgets passed and 100% of Orange County school budgets passed on May 19, 2009. This represents the results of collective political action and lobbying at its finest. Thank you for your efforts. In the end, it is always the collective efforts of the general membership that determine our success or failure with regard to political action and lobbying.

—Tim Brown