



## Strategies for Building Effective Relationships with Politicians

Summary by Celeste Land of Vienna,  
Chair VHEA Government Affairs Committee

Presented by Delegate Rob Bell, Charlottesville, at the 2002 VHEA Conference & Curriculum Fair

- The legislative “off season” (April through December) is the best time to contact our state legislators, because they have more time to meet with constituents. If you form relationships with your legislators during the off season, they are more likely to listen to you when issues come up during the General Assembly.
- Instead of approaching legislators at campaign events, invite your legislator to lunch and talk to him about homeschooling, either alone or with other homeschooling families from your legislator’s district. Another option would be to invite your legislator to meet with or speak to your local homeschooling group.
- It is more effective to contact your own delegate or senator about an issue, rather than calling legislators outside your district.
- When contacting your legislator about specific homeschooling issues, a personally written letter is better than a phone message or an e-mail. This shows that you really care about the issue in question.
- Respect the motivations of different legislators. Some legislators are interested in religious issues, some are interested in academic standards, etc. Find out what motivates your legislators, and influence them accordingly.
- Don’t participate in media events or activities which may burn bridges with the very legislators you are trying to influence. If you can envision working with a particular legislator in the future, then don’t do anything which might unnecessarily antagonize him.
- Even if you are satisfied with the status quo of current homeschooling law, write your legislator anyway and let him know that you are a homeschooler who supports the laws as they are currently written.

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## How and Why Homeschoolers Should Be Involved in Local and State Politics

Summary by Celeste Land of Vienna,  
Chair VHEA Government Affairs Committee

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Why should homeschoolers take part in state and local politics? How can homeschoolers get involved in grassroots politics? What are the most effective ways for homeschoolers to influence politicians? These were some of the questions addressed by Delegate Rob Bell of the Virginia House of Delegates, who spoke at VHEA's recent homeschooling conference in Charlottesville on June 1. Delegate Bell has a longstanding personal interest in homeschooling issues. His younger brother and sister were homeschooled through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Bell's mother was one of many parents who visited Richmond in 1984 to help legalize homeschooling in Virginia. Her successful activism may have influenced Bell's decision to become active in politics as an adult.

### Getting Involved in Grass-Roots Politics

Speaking from his years of experience as a grassroots volunteer and local party chairman, Delegate Bell encouraged homeschoolers of all ages to play a more active role in politics. He noted that children who become involved in local or state politics when young are more likely to play an active role in the political process as they get older.

While national political campaigns are more high-profile, involvement in local politics may be more satisfying for a homeschooling family who wishes to become politically ac-

tive. Since most campaigns are run with only a handful of volunteers, an individual or a single family can make a big difference in local politics. Volunteers in local politics also are more likely to meet the candidates and to work with them directly.

There are many different ways that homeschooled children can help in a political campaign, including licking envelopes, knocking on doors on behalf of a candidate, answering phones, putting up signs, etc. Campaign volunteers may work as many or as few hours as they wish, and they may try different activities to see which ones suit them best.

Delegate Bell encouraged homeschooled children and their families to visit Richmond and see the legislative process in action. Children can watch the floor votes, debates, and arguments. Teen homeschoolers may be interested in working directly with their local legislator and his staff as an intern or a page.

State legislators are very interested in hearing from the people who live in their district. Delegate Bell encouraged homeschooled children to write to their delegates or senators about issues of interest. He also encouraged homeschooling parents to contact their local legislators with their questions and concerns, as well as their ideas for possible legislation.

### Changing Politicians' Perceptions of Homeschooling

Self-interest is perhaps the most important reason for homeschoolers to play an active role in state and local politics. Delegate Bell re-

membered the days when homeschooling was illegal in Virginia, and observed that many politicians today would like to see homeschooling restricted. Bell commented that many elected officials, including delegates, state senators, school board members, and county supervisors, are not aware of the homeschoolers in their own communities.

While many politicians perceive homeschooling as a "Republican issue," Delegate Bell observed that there are many Republican politicians who are not supportive of homeschooling and many Democratic politicians who are supportive. He also noted that while many teachers' unions in public schools are officially opposed to homeschooling, many public school teachers—including his own wife—are supportive of homeschooling. The challenge is to make politicians, teachers' unions, and other potential critics perceive homeschooling as a non-partisan issue and a "win-win" issue. Bell pointed out that most people are neither for or against homeschooling, just ignorant. They have never met a homeschooler and don't know what motivates them.

Bell shared with his audience several strategies for building effective relationships with politicians (see sidebar on page 4) and strongly encouraged homeschoolers to form working relationships with their legislators. He observed that people from home are more likely to impress a legislator than a paid lobbyist, a financial contributor, or even a VHEA representative.

"Don't designate anyone to speak for you," Bell advised. "Do it yourself."