

The Squeaky Wheel

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As I look back on the week an idea that has been presented by so many of the speakers really stuck with, just show up. This idea has helped me tweak something I have always done with my students in both my regular and A.P. U.S. Government class. I would have the students pick a topic based in national policy and formulate a letter. The students are required to research both sides of the issue and show the documentation of that research. Next, they chose a side that they supported and drafted a letter (see attached). After having me proof the draft, they would write a final, give it to me in a stamped envelope and I would send it off. No e-mails allowed. What I plan to do this year is to have the students find an issue, concern or problem at multiple levels and see what they can accomplish through whatever means we as a group can identify. What helped me develop this idea was my own experience earlier this summer. There was a very large pothole in front of my house and an abandoned shopping cart on the corner of my street. I and my neighbors were commenting about these things, but no one thought to do anything. I made 3 phone calls the next day using the government pages in the phonebook. Within 2 days, both of the problems were solved.

My plan is to have students identify issues, problem concern on multiple levels (school, city, county, state, and national). The students will have to try to do what ever they can to reach a conclusion/resolution to their issue that is acceptable to them. It can be

something simple like a pothole or more challenging like a crosswalk. All along the way, the students will keep a journal of contacts made and results of the contacts. I realize that some of what they would want to accomplish may not happen before the year ends.

However, I would like to find some success with something simple like filling a pothole in hopes that will it make them understand that more difficult issues take much more to resolve. I also hope that they will understand that local government has such a significant impact on their everyday lives that it is important to participate in the process of choosing their elected officials.

GUIDE TO WRITING A CONGRESSIONAL LEADER

Suggested Reasons to Write a Member of Congress

Express an opinion:

- about a current issue
- about a former vote on legislation

Ask a question:

- Why does your leader support a specific issue?
- What is his or her opinion on a specific issue?
- What are the challenges facing a representative in Congress?

Propose legislation

- Explain a problem you see in your community. Depending on the representative you chose to write, this could be a national, state, or local issue.
- Suggest a solution to a problem.

II. Preparing to Write the Letter

Research your Congressional representative

- Find out on which committee(s) your representative serves. Is the issue that most interests you one in which your representative also has an interest?
- What is his/her voting record? Is your representative's political ideology more liberal or more conservative than your own?
- What recent legislation has he/she sponsored? This can indicate an area of interest or expertise for your representative.

Research your issue

- Find out if any organizations or elected officials feel the same as you about this issue. Your representative may find this interesting, especially if they are also from your state. How do these organizations gather information and support for their position?
- Read recent newspaper and magazine articles about your issue. What statistical or factual evidence can you gather that supports your opinion?

Write the Letter

1776 Independence Way
Charlottesville, Virginia 22902

September 6, 2003

The Honorable Virgil H. Goode, Jr.
1520 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Use Speak Out! to find your official's address.

Dear Congressman Goode,
My name is T.J. and I am a twelfth grader from Monticello High School. I am very concerned about how our nation celebrates that Fourth of July holiday and hope you can answer a couple of questions.

Begin by identifying who you are and why you are writing.

In the 225 years since the Declaration of Independence was written, our understanding of this document and its importance to the history of this nation has increasingly declined. According to a recent poll of graduating high school seniors, almost half of them did not realize that the July 4 holiday commemorates the signing of this great document. Years ago people would celebrate the Fourth by gathering together to read the Declaration of Independence and discuss the importance of the tiny American colonies breaking free from the tyranny of the British Empire. Today the holiday is marked by mega sales at the local shopping mall and contests to consume the most hot dogs in fifteen minutes. These are great for the economy, but they certainly do not encourage respect for freedom, liberty or the sacrifices of past generations.

Explain why you think your issue so important

I believe it is up to legislators to provide guidance to our country by passing a law requiring all stores to close at 2pm on July 4. This would allow all Americans to properly celebrate the holiday rather than working or shopping. Congress could also encourage a more thoughtful approach to the day by providing forums for discussion of our history and readings of the Declaration of Independence nationwide.

Offer a specific solution.

I am interested in your reaction to this proposal. Is this an issue you would be willing to discuss with other members of Congress? Do you have any suggestions for making my proposal appealing to you and other legislators?

Ask that the official write back with his or her opinion and thank him or her for reading your letter.

I appreciate your consideration of these questions and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

T.J. Stroupe