

Working the Legislative Chamber Doors: How to Access Your Legislator During Floor Sessions

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The Floor Environment: Our Legislature is structured by a set of deadlines enabling members to complete their work on time. The Washington State Constitution mandates the number of days the Legislature will be in session. The Legislature chooses each year when the deadlines will fall on their calendar. In general, the deadlines tend to be similar each session. These deadlines dictate the activity the Legislature will be engaged with during a particular time. Often the PTA's Focus Day happens to fall during what is known as "floor time". A mid-February date is often the cut-off date for both policy and budget bills to come out of their house of origin. There are seven days mid-February when members will be spending most of their time in House or Senate chambers making decisions on the bills that have come out of committees. Usually, committee hearings are not held during this time, though there are exceptions.

When the House and Senate are on the floor, advocates have to reach their members in different ways. PTA members may be able to make appointments during the periods around floor activity - early morning, lunch time, or after the members adjourn for the day. They may also be able to speak with a legislative assistant who can pass on messages to your legislator, as well as any letters or documents you may want to leave behind. You may also leave a message with the Legislative Hotline at 1-800-562-6000. Or, you can leave a message with the assistant asking if the member can give you a return call. (Please note: not all members are willing to do so).

The Floor Door Routine: The other way to talk with legislators while they are on the floor is by "working the doors." Note that on the door is a placard -- it will give some indication whether that body is in session, is in caucus, or at recess. That information gives you an idea whether your legislator is at his or her desk. There are four doors that access chambers on the third floor of the Legislative Building. There are two for the House and two for the Senate. One is for the Democrats and one is for the Republicans. The public is not allowed inside the chambers, unless invited by a member. These invitations are infrequent on the House side, more frequent on the Senate side, but not the usual means of talking with your legislator. Instead, there is a pad of paper outside the chamber doors with either "North Door" or "South Door" - one color for the House and another color for the Senate. On these you can write a note to your legislator asking if they will come out of chambers to speak with you for a couple of minutes. Be sure and write legibly - include your name, the member's name and the member's seat number - not the District number - on the House or Senate floor (there is usually a seating list hanging on the wall outside the chamber door). Also, note on the list those members who do not come out of chambers. Use an alternative way to talk with those members.

The Door Note Process: Once you have finished your note, hand it to the security staff person at the chamber door. Be pleasant - they are important to your efforts! The security staff will transmit your message to the security staff inside chambers. Inside, the note will be handed to a page, who will then deliver the message to the legislator's desk on the floor. After receiving the note, the legislator may be able to come out and speak with you, may write a note back indicating their availability, or may ignore you. Do not take it personally! They may be engaged in an issue on the floor or involved in a conversation about a different issue so they cannot get away. You may have to wait some time. *Be patient, be patient, be patient.*

You're On: Once they respond by coming out, be prepared to be concise. Make sure your message is relayed such that there is no doubt as to your request. If you have something to provide in writing, make sure that is concise. It is helpful if the document mirrors your verbal request.

Please be sure to graciously say "thank you". Do not protest if the legislator moves on to another person. Many legislators will come out with a handful of notes asking for their attention.

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