

Public Education: The Concerned Constituent's Toolkit



What Your MLA Cares About

When it comes to constituent interactions, MLAs care about things that make them look good, responsive, and hardworking to the people of their district. In practice, that means that they care about some things very much, and other things very little.

Your MLA Cares a Lot About:

- Verified constituents from the riding
- Advocacy that requires effort — the more effort, the more they care: calls, personal emails, and especially showing up in person in the district
- Local press and editorials, maybe provincial press
- Groups of constituents, locally famous individuals, or big individual campaign contributors
- Concrete asks that entail a verifiable action — vote for a bill, make a public statement, etc.
- A single ask in your communication — letter, email, phone call, office visit, etc.

Good Outcome vs. Bad Outcome

To make this a bit more concrete and show where advocacy comes in, below are some examples of actions that a MLA might take, what they're hoping to see happen as a result, and what they really don't want to see happen. Some MLAs will go to great lengths to avoid bad outcomes — even as far as changing their positions or public statements.

Desired Outcome: Local newspaper reports that MLA X hosted constituents and discussed his work to balance the budget.

Bad Outcome: Local newspaper reports that angry constituents strongly objected to MLA X's support for privatizing education.

Help, my MLA is in a Safe Riding!

If your actions threaten this narrative, then you will unnerve your MLA and change their decision-making process. If your MLA won the last election by a large margin, you may assume that they have a safe seat and there's nothing you can do to influence them. This is not true! The reality is that no MLA ever considers themselves to be safe from all threats. MLAs who have nothing to fear from a general election still worry about party nomination challenges.

What is often opaque to constituents is the closed-door policy discussions of the government; placing pressure on individual MLAs can translate into internal party rife and division and influence policy and legislative priorities.

More broadly, no one stays an MLA without being borderline compulsive about protecting their image. Even the safest MLA will be deeply alarmed by signs of organized opposition, because these actions create the impression that they're not connected to their district and not listening to their constituents.

Preparing for a Constituency Meeting

Every MLA has a constituency office. These are public offices, open for anybody to visit — you don't need an appointment. You can schedule a meeting individually or with a group, but you can also take advantage of the public nature of the offices to stage an impromptu town hall meeting by showing up with a small group. It is much harder for constituency office staff to turn away a group than a single constituent, even without an appointment.

1. Find out where your MLA's constituency offices is. You can look them up at this website: http://www.assembly.ab.ca/net/index.aspx?p=mla_home
2. Plan a trip when the MLA is there. Most constituency offices are open only approximately 10am – 3pm Monday - Friday. MLAs are often away from their constituencies when legislature is in session, but the entire legislature has designated "constituency weeks" approximately once a month. Find out when the next one is schedule for.
3. Prepare several questions ahead of time. Your questions should be sharp and fact-based, ideally including information on the MLA's record, votes they've taken, or statements they've made. Thematically, questions should focus on a limited number of issues to maximize impact. Prepare 5-10 of these questions and hand them out to your group ahead of the meeting. Write down their answers as accurately as possible.
4. Have a specific "ask" — e.g., vote against X, publicly state Z, etc.
5. Share a personal story of how you or someone in your group is personally impacted by the undermining public education.
6. Advertise what you're doing. Communicate on social media, and tell the local reporters you follow what is happening. Take and send pictures and videos with your group: "At MLA X's office with 10 other constituents to talk to her about our concerns about attacks on public education. They refuse to meet with us and staff won't tell us when she will come out. We're waiting."
7. If the MLA asks to have a photograph taken, consider politely declining. MLAs want to turn constituent meetings into "good news stories" on social media and examples that they are listening and engaging. However, it's important to remember that they have not yet taken any tangible actions on your concerns. State that you do not wish to be appear to be endorsing the member while your serious concerns remain outstanding.

8. Consider arranging designated roles if you are visiting the MLA as a group, such as:
 - a. Story-teller(s): one or two people who have a compelling story of how undercutting public education has hurt them or their family personally.
 - b. Lead questioner(s): two or three people who take the lead on asking prepared questions
 - c. Note-taker: someone to keep a written record of questions and answers as accurately as possible.
 - d. Fact-checker: someone who comes armed with printed research and notes and is constantly listening to the MLAs response and ready to counter with facts.
 - e. Social-media publisher: someone to take photographs and live-post on social media platforms (note that all members should share and re-Tweet as soon as they can.)
 - f. Respect enforcer: someone ready and willing to politely but assertively call out MLAs for derogatory, demeaning or disrespectful language if they hear it.

Make Your Voices Heard by Asking Good Questions

Be polite but persistent, and demand real answers. MLAs are very good at deflecting or dodging questions they don't want to answer. If the MLAs dodges, ask a follow-up question. If they aren't giving you real answers, then call them out for it.

Don't give up until you're satisfied with the answer. If they object, then say politely but loudly: "I'm not finished. The MLA is dodging my question. Why are you trying to stop me from following up?"

Example Questions for your MLA

Remember to write down the answers as accurately as possible!

Q: Do you think it's appropriate for children to have only access to a 0.2 music teacher, a 0.3 phys ed teacher, no librarian, eat on gym floors, (or insert your own personal situation) as a result of chronic underfunding of community public schools?

Q: How did you vote on Policy 15 at the recent UCP AGM? (Policy 15 supports a 100% voucher education system for Alberta). Will you make a public statement that you oppose any changes to the funding?

Q: Today, there are more than 1300 K-3 students in Alberta in a class size of 30 or more. Do you believe this is acceptable? By eliminating detailed provincial reporting of class size data, does this government believe that growing class sizes are not a problem? Do you believe that parents shouldn't care about class sizes and don't have a right to know the classroom conditions of their children? Will you commit to making a public statement of your support for resuming collection of detailed class size data?

Q: Will you make a public statement firmly rejecting any changes to legislation or regulation that would allow public funds to be used by private schools or charter schools to acquire or build capital infrastructure?

Q: Will you petition your fellow caucus members to honour this government's word to increase funding of public education to meet previous levels, and keep pace with growing enrollment (expected 15,000 provincially in the next four years), and that downloading more expenses (such as school and transportation fees, or fundraising) to citizens is unacceptable?

Q: Do you support the concept that public funds should remain accountable to publicly elected school districts?

Myths and Realities

Be prepared for your questions to be answered with rehearsed and pre-prepared talking points; know in advance the flaws in the expected rebuttals and show them you have come prepared with research and a better understanding.

Myth: Education funding wasn't reduced -- the budget remains the same.

Reality: Despite the claims from both the Ministers Lagrange (6 Sept) and Toews (10 June) that enrollment growth would be funded, this budget does not increase for the 15,000 new students expected in the next 4 years, inflation, or dramatic hikes in insurance costs. Nearly every school district in the province has made public statements about unexpected budget shortfalls that are impacting teacher layoffs, transport fees, school fees or building maintenance.

<https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/ucp-budget-freezes-k-12-education-funding-cuts-post-secondaries>

Reality: Funding for private schools in Alberta did increase from 286 million to 291 million.

Myth: Class sizes. Class size funding was rescinded because it was not having an impact on class sizes

Reality: By the government's own report, the program added over 2900 teachers to the system over 15 years, but the government review did NOT consider what class sizes would be WITHOUT these 2900 teachers. Well over 80% of the funding went towards teachers. Without these considerations, the government's analysis is not credible.

Reality: The government class size report relied heavily on rudimentary analysis like class averages. This does not accurately reflect the experiences of children in the classroom. A better analysis can be found in this report. Why has the government not considered this analysis as a way to properly address increasing class sizes?

<https://www.supportourstudents.ca/classsizes.html>

Myth: The Minister believes in school board autonomy and that boards have the necessary resources to make decisions for their students

Reality: Funding for Calgary Board Education, the third largest school board in Canada, is insufficient, resulting in a 48 million shortfall for the 2019/2020 school year. Questioning their

ability to autonomously budget their board, the minister has called for a financial review of the CBE.

Reality: Boards across the province have had to use reserves, charge fees and cut programs to make up for reduced funding. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/bus-transportation-fees-st-albert-1.5379420>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/education-provincial-budget-cuts-edmonton-public-schools-letter-parents-1.5353998>

Myth: The CBE spends too much on administration, and requires auditing.

Reality: The Education Act stipulates: “The maximum expenditure for system administration and school board governance will range from 3.6% to 5.4%, depending on the student enrolment of the school jurisdiction.”

(<https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/8f3b4972-4c47-4009-a090-5b470e68d633/resource/0d0d30db-3577-48bb-9f22-740a05dcfd90/download/edc-funding-manual-2019-2020.pdf>)

Every school board budget is submitted to the Minister for final approval.

Reality: The CBE holds independent audits (ie. KPMG - same corporation that supported the MacKinnon report: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/research-analysis-for-blue-ribbon-panel-on-albertas-finances>) and had an operational review conducted in 2017 that found the board operates in keeping with the other metro boards and no significant inefficiencies were found. <https://www.cbe.ab.ca/about-us/budget-and-finance/Documents/Financial-Results-for-the-Calgary-Board-of-Education-2017-18.pdf>

Myth: Alberta spends more per student than other provinces with poorer results (As per the MacKinnon Report).

Reality: The very same Mackinnon Report indicates: “Alberta spends \$11,121 per student. British Columbia spends \$9,681 per student, the lowest among our comparator group, while Ontario spends \$17,077 and Quebec spends \$12,325 per student.”

Reality: Alberta does not have “poorer results” when it comes to public education. According to the most recent PISA 2018 results: Alberta’s Public Education system is 3rd in the world in reading, 3rd in science and 8th in math. <https://www.cmec.ca/251/Overview.html>

Reality: Equally important is understanding how standardized tests like the PISA masque existing inequalities across education systems; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/12/03/expert-how-pisa-created-an-illusion-education-quality-marketed-it-world/>

Myth: Alberta UCP government wants to implement a voucher system to improve the education system.

Reality: Alberta Education already has a voucher system, where public funding follows students outside the public system to their school of choice be that charter or private. The current

voucher system in Alberta is 100% per student funding for charter schools, and 70% per student for private schools. At the recent UCP AGM in Calgary, Policy 15 was passed, which promotes a 100% voucher system for Alberta, meaning funding for private schools would increase.

Myth: Funding should follow the student.

Reality: Citizens pay into a pool of taxes. No one is paying in taxes what it costs to educate children in the public system (See Hokey Pokey post)

<https://www.facebook.com/SOSAlberta/photos/a.1658321187781929/2619004741713564/?type=3&theater>

Reality: Vouchers widen inequity. There is no evidence in any state or nation that vouchers improve access or quality of education. <https://theconversation.com/school-vouchers-expand-despite-evidence-of-negative-effects-117370>

Myth: Teachers are indoctrinating and are teaching anti-oil curriculum and politicizing our classrooms

Reality: The current Social Studies curriculum was last updated in 2005-2009 under Ralph Klein. Social Studies is the class to critically analyse different political, social and historical perspectives.

Myth: Parents want abundance of school choice

Reality: Parents choose to apply to a school, the school decides who to let in.

Reality: Parents by-and-large, want to choose a community school with comprehensive music, arts, phys ed, language programming with robust current curriculum, a school that is well staffed and resourced.

Reality: Choice only exists in urban centres. Rural students do not have access to the same programming as urban students.

Myth: Fundraising is an inevitable part of schools in Alberta.

Reality: Fundraising absolves the government of its responsibility to adequately fund public education. Parents should not be fundraising for basic needs like books, furniture, PE equipment, art supplies, flooring, computers/technology.

Reality: Not every school has the ability to fundraise. This creates “have” and “have not” schools

Education is a right; your support is a gift. Everything we achieve together is only possible because of ordinary people like you chipping in what they can. Please consider donating a few bucks a week to Support our Students. Click here to set up a donation: <https://www.supportourstudents.ca/donate>

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