Over the last several decades NC CASE and other organizations have worked on issues impacting children with disabilities in North Carolina. Key to those efforts are how we work with bodies such as our Cities, Counties and Agencies.

We are all very busy! It is easy to think that advocacy is not your job, you don’t have time, or you don’t know how to go about it. But the fact is that services for children with disabilities are underfunded, there is excessive regulation, there are insufficient staff, and the mandates and data requirements are overwhelming. So, what do we do? If we don’t advocate, we don’t impact the resources and process for the services we provide. But how do we it?

The simplest approach to advocacy involves three things; knowing and being able to convey who you are and represent concisely; being clear on who you are addressing; and preparing and conveying a simple message with a manageable outcome. These are not as hard it may seem.

First, define briefly who you are. “Hello, I am the EC Director/ Resource teacher/ Physical Therapist from XX school system in XX county. We/I have/ serve XX number of children with disabilities in XX community.” This tells them who you are and that you serve numerous families/children in their constituency or under their agency.

Second, know who you are talking to. This involves a little leg work. All cities, counties, the NC House and Senate, NC Agencies, the Federal House and Senate, and Federal Agencies have websites. They all list contact information. For instance, entering NC House of representatives as a search will bring up their website. You can then hit, find your legislator, enter your address and get a list of ‘your’ Federal and State representatives as well as their offices and contact information. Remember, to use your work address if you don’t live in the same district where you are employed. Then you will know that you are contacting people who represent children and families you serve. You always include, “I understand that my/our families/children are represented by your office/position/agency?” This allows them to acknowledge their position and responsibilities in a nice way.

Third, work out your short and summarized message. Think of a conversation you would have with someone in an elevator. The funds/ requirements/ bill will have XX impact on children and families in the district where I work. For instance, “The lack of sufficient Speech Language Pathologists/ Occupational Therapist/ Nurses means children do not get the services they need.” Then give them a simple thing you are asking. “Please help address this staff shortage in NC.”

Give them a card, email, phone number, address for yourself so they can respond. Don’t be surprised if you get a perfunctory response and wind up on their mailing list. That’s OK. They know who you are. They know your issue. It lays the groundwork for future contacts when other issues come up.

So, put the three pieces together. Then reach out. Any method works. Email, a phone message, a letter, a visit, when you have to go somewhere for a meeting anyway. Be polite, be professional, don’t threaten. THANK THEM for their time and effort. Say or write “You appreciate all they do for the children of NC.” Even if you have to bite your tongue when you say it; acknowledging that they are working to make things better keeps the door open for future conversations.

You are an advocate now by saying and doing nothing. The message you deliver is up to you.

Sam Dempsey, Legislative Liaison, NC CASE