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Preparing for a School Board Presentation on Tobacco-Free Schools

Making a presentation to the school board is a critical step in securing or defending a tobacco-free policy. It is the board that is ultimately responsible for policy enactment and enforcement. Here are some issues to consider in planning and conducting the presentation.

Prior to the school board presentation

Prior to the school board meeting, assess or re-assess the position of individual members of the school board on the tobacco-free school policy. If possible, do this in face-to-face meetings. How many are in favor of the policy? What makes it important to them? Those who are in favor should be given additional supportive information that will allow them to effectively articulate the reasons for their position. It is also important to find out which members are neutral. They may lack critical information on the issue that can move them to change their position. Finally, try to meet with those who do not support the policy. Why are they against it? While you may not be able to change their position, you will be better able to anticipate and prepare for their questions and challenges during the presentation. Assemble and distribute information packets (see below) before the meeting. Regardless of their position, all school board members should be well prepared with information on the issue before the presentation.

Addressing the School Board

Planning the Presentation

The board meeting should be well orchestrated. The content addressed in the presentation will depend on many factors: who is presenting; issues and concerns of the school board; community support for enacting a 100% tobacco-free school policy and the amount of time available to present. Below are some ideas on topics to

include in the presentation and who might provide this information. Base your decision on what topics to select, and who will provide the information, on what you think will be most influential to the school board. Encourage speakers to adopt a collaborative, rather than an “us against them” attitude, with the school board. After all, you are all on the same side in striving to do what’s best for the youth in the school district. Ask each speaker if they can pledge their support and the support of their agency (if feasible) to work together with the school district in making this policy change a success.

- ◆ **Information on the health effects of tobacco use.** The presenter should be a credible medical/health professional. The health director of the local health department or well-known or influential physician in the community would be ideal to have on your side. The information should address the effects of tobacco use on the healthy development of children, the effects of secondhand smoke, the particular effects on children with asthma and similar conditions, the relationship of smoking to common childhood illnesses, such as ear infections and upper respiratory infections (common causes of school absence), the extremely addictive nature of nicotine for youth, the impact that tobacco use has on learning, and the fact that if a child can complete high school without using tobacco he or she is likely to be tobacco-free for life.
- ◆ **Impact of school tobacco use on youth/Youth opinion of a tobacco-free school policy.** The presenter should be an articulate, well-spoken youth advocate who has been involved in the issue. A member of the Teens Against Tobacco Use (TATU) or other student anti-tobacco organization would be ideal. A student with asthma would also be a good choice. The presentation should offer the youth perspective on school tobacco use, starting out with how are they affected by tobacco use on campus and their opinions on the issue. Does it bother them to see teachers using tobacco on campus? Do they believe this provides a poor role model for students? Does allowing tobacco use on campus contradict health messages they receive in the classroom on the dangers of tobacco use? Are they bothered by tobacco use at school sporting events? Students should also note that they do not have a choice to not attend school, and thus avoid exposure to tobacco. Therefore, it is the school board’s responsibility to provide a safe and healthy learning environment free from exposure to known carcinogens, and one in which adults are role models for healthy behavior. Students may also want to share their concerns about tobacco use among their peers and how they think this policy will lead to a decrease in tobacco use among youth. Students may want to present signed petitions or summaries of student surveys to demonstrate support for the policy change.
- ◆ **School administrator’s perspective.** School staff can provide information on tobacco use prevalence within the school district, current tobacco prevention

efforts, and information on how this policy will support comprehensive school health efforts. They can also provide an overview of the benefits they anticipate with the passage of a 100% tobacco-free school policy. For instance, a 100% tobacco-free school policy:

- Provides positive role modeling by adult employees and visitors;
- Reduces children's observation of tobacco use and takes a firm stand against it;
- Supports, rather than confounds, prevention messages delivered in the classroom
- Provides a safe environment for students by reducing exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. This can lead to a reduction in student absences from asthma, ear infections and upper respiratory infections – all of which are directly related to environmental tobacco smoke.
- Protects children from a dangerous and addictive drug;
- Complies with federal legislation prohibiting smoking inside school buildings and does not conflict with state law on smoking in public places;
- Models respect for state laws designed to limit access to tobacco by children;
- Prepares students for the realities of a smoke-free workplace;
- Proactively protects schools from unnecessary risk of future liability (i.e.: asthma attack that is triggered because a child is exposed to smoke in a school setting);
- Reduces cost of cleaning and maintenance on grounds and athletic fields;
- Reduces the risk of fire due to smoking materials.

Who Should Speak to the School Board?

Consider inviting the Safe and Drug Free School Coordinator, Healthy Living Coordinator or the person charged with comprehensive school health efforts; a principal; a coach; a counselor; and/or a school nurse. The presenter may want to provide a summary of survey results of school employees, which shows widespread support for the policy change.

- ◆ **Parents.** A parent can make a very compelling and emotional presentation in support of 100% tobacco-free schools. Parents who are also influential in the community are ideal. Key points for parents to make include:

- **Parental expectations.** Parents expect the school board to provide a healthy and safe learning environment, free from exposure to known carcinogens. Whether at school, or participating in after school events, they need to be assured that their children’s health is of primary importance;
- **Role models.** School staff should be positive role models for youth. Allowing tobacco use on campus “teaches” youth that it is okay, and suggests that the consequences for tobacco use may not be as bad as they are told in the classroom.
- **Tobacco-free zone.** Youth are bombarded by messages in magazines, in theaters, on billboards and on television to use tobacco products. Half of North Carolina youth live in homes where there is at least one tobacco user. School should be a place where youth are safe from this constant influence. Providing 7-8 hours a day where youth are free from tobacco can have a real impact on their decision to use tobacco products.
- **Mixed messages.** It is pointless to take the time to deliver prevention messages in the classroom, only to allow adults to use tobacco products on campus.
- **Risk for children with asthma.** Secondhand smoke is very detrimental to children with asthma and similar respiratory conditions, and is known to be a trigger leading to asthma attacks. New research shows that children exposed to secondhand smoke use tobacco at alarming rates. School should be a place where these children are safe, rather than at risk from exposure to tobacco smoke and from addiction.

The parent may want to present signed petitions and/or a summary of surveys of community members which demonstrate widespread support within the community for the policy.

- ◆ **Law enforcement.** Police officers, especially local DARE officers, and school resource officers can provide information on issues related to enforcing the current tobacco policy. For example, have they encountered problems enforcing a tobacco use policy that allows some people to use tobacco products, but not others? They can also discuss benefits they anticipate if the school district implements a 100% tobacco-free school policy.
- ◆ **Local health organizations.** Staff from the local Healthy Carolinians Coalition, the American Cancer Society, the American Lung Association, or the American Heart Association can be effective speakers on the issue. They can point out that the vast majority of tobacco users started before the age of 18, making it imperative that schools join with parents and community organizations in doing everything possible to prevent tobacco use. They can also outline the support and

resources they can provide to the school district when the policy is in place. The representative can also present letters of support for the policy from community agencies and organizations.

- ◆ **State agency representative.** Staff from the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch or from the Department of Public Instruction may be available to provide the “larger picture,” and to provide additional encouragement to the School Board to consider the issue. They can also share experiences of other school districts across the state, and serve as “back up” if questions arise that local staff are unable to address.

Have supporters present at the meeting. Even with a planned presentation, there may be an opportunity for supporters to address the School Board during the public comment portion of the meeting.

Handouts and Materials

Assemble information packets and distribute them to school board members during the week before the presentation. Packets may include:

- ◆ [Letters demonstrating state level support for tobacco-free schools](#). Include letters from former Governor Hunt; Governor Easley and State School Superintendent Ward; and the State School Board Resolution. Ask the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch to provide a letter of support.
- ◆ Letters of support from local agencies such as the local Healthy Carolinians Coalition, the Health Department, and the American Lung Association.
- ◆ The current policy and the proposed policy;
- ◆ Summary results from surveys and petitions;
- ◆ Research on youth tobacco use such as [Youth Tobacco Survey](#) data for middle and high school students;
- ◆ An [overview of tobacco-free schools](#) highlighting why this is such an important issue;
- ◆ [FAQ’s on tobacco-free schools](#);
- ◆ [A map of tobacco-free school districts](#).

Copies of most of these items are [available from the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch](#).

Dealing with Challenges and Counter Arguments

In preparing for the presentation, your team will have identified some of the counter-arguments they will face during the presentation from opponents to the issue. Make sure you are clear on the motivation behind the challenge. Knowing why a school board member or community member is challenging the policy will help your team to counter the challenge with arguments that specifically address the reasons presented. Don't wait for your opponents to bring them up after the presentation. Instead, use the presentation as an opportunity to *proactively* acknowledge these concerns and offer information or solutions. Here are some common counter-arguments and strategies for addressing and responding to them:

- ◆ **“This policy is not supportive of the tobacco farming community”**
Acknowledge the role that tobacco plays in the community. At the same time, note that the health of young people is even more important. A 100% tobacco-free school policy will not result in local tobacco farms failing – yet it will help to ensure that young people remain tobacco-free. This will have a direct and lifelong benefit to youth and to the community.
- ◆ **“This policy will be impossible to enforce”** As a part of your presentation, summarize the UNC-School of Public Health research project showing that, for school districts that clearly and consistently communicate the policy, enforcement was not an issue. Point out that while school personnel initially may fear approaching violators, the situation is rarely confrontational when handled consistently and tactfully. In the presentation, offer some simple, creative steps the school district can take to enforce the policy that have been successfully used by other school districts. Emphasize that the benefits of the policy will far outweigh any of the minor initial “hassles” of enforcement. Include the *handout “Tips for Enforcement”* in any materials provided to School Board Members and encourage them to review the information.
- ◆ **“Attendance will drop at sporting/other school events”** Mention that research has shown that school districts with a 100% tobacco-free school policy in place have not experienced a decrease in attendance at school events. In fact, it has been demonstrated that for every one attendee lost, six new ones are gained. Researchers found that many people – particularly nonsmokers – avoided coming to events such as football games where they may be uncomfortable due to tobacco smoke. Many parents also avoid attending because they don't want their children exposed to the smoke, or to the role modeling of tobacco use. Also point out that people who attend school events are usually school supporters, such as parents, students, and former students. The vast majority will be supportive of and willing

to comply with school policies. Finally, discuss how tobacco users – particularly smokers – are accustomed to complying with smoking restrictions. Yet these people still attend movies, fly on airplanes, and attend church, all places where they cannot smoke.

- ◆ **“Adults have a right to smoke”** Point out that children have a right to breathe clean air. Mention that adults also have a right to drink alcohol and carry guns, but these are not allowed on school property. You can also defuse this challenge by re-framing tobacco-free schools as a children’s health issue. Challenge the school board to put a policy in place that supports the health of all students, rather than allow a policy designed to support the addiction of a minority of the adults in the school district to continue.