

A Legislative Visit in an Elementary School

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Disclaimer: I am not a political person. I work in a busy, active library with a fixed schedule leaving little time for "extras." I am not the bravest soul to walk the school's halls, especially when it comes to people who hold titles and "higher" positions in the work force -- but I do have a sense of adventure. And that, it turns out, was all it took!

I did it! Final report submitted to the committee, check. Thank you note written to legislator, check. Glow of satisfaction firmly in place, the end! Or is it?

Having a state legislator visit an elementary library for a day was easy, right? Maybe it wasn't "easy" but it wasn't nearly as difficult as one might think. This whole idea of inviting a legislator to my elementary library began last summer with the legislative committee meeting in State College. The legislative committee generated a campaign to make legislators aware of what happens in school libraries. School libraries are becoming candidates for the chopping block as budgets become tighter and Pennsylvania is no exception. Approximately 40 percent of Pennsylvania schools currently have no librarian or library. The committee reasoned that if lawmakers could see inside school libraries, they could observe first-hand what we do and how we have used state and federal funding to create a learning environment that is good for our children.

The legislative committee recognized that scheduling a representative or senator could be time-consuming and working librarians do not have that kind of time on their hands. With this in mind, a plan developed to train retired school librarians as "event planners" to handle the ins and outs of setting up such a visit. When a practicing librarian contacted the legislative committee, they would be linked to an event planner who would make the arrangements with the legislator, the media, and other outside resources necessary for a successful visit. This is thoroughly covered by PSLA's web page, "Legislator @ your library campaign." There are checklists for the librarian and the event planners as well as ideas for what to do once you get the local legislator in the library. This is a well-constructed and fine-tuned program that leaves the host library in a good position to extend an invitation and have a successful visit.

And it works! I agreed to invite a local legislator to my library. My name was handed over to an event planner, Lin Carvell. I received an email from Lin and we arranged



Rep. Tom C. Creighton (R-Manheim) interacts with students working on library computers.

a time to connect via telephone. We worked through the checklist and decided which legislator to invite (we decided to invite Representative Tom Creighton), and upon what area to focus attention (we had received a laptop grant so we focused on using the laptops and POWER Library). During this conversation, tentative dates were selected. Because Lin was in sync with the legislative calendar, we decided that April would be the best time. It was already January and I had to know what I would be teaching and what special activities would be occurring in April -- a bit frightening. By the time Lin and I spoke on the telephone, I had already secured permission for the visit from my school district. Lin contacted Rep. Creighton's office shortly after our conversation to secure a mutually acceptable date. However, a return call from Lin delivered the bad news that our first choice of dates did not work. But librarians are always flexible, so we looked at the school schedule again to find dates that were acceptable. We were on the way to a legislative visit.

Lin and I exchanged emails for a few weeks and then the waiting began. I needed to determine who would take care of the publicity -- did Lin need to set this up or should I use the PR person from my district? This was more complicated than one would think but we finally worked through those details. About three weeks before the visit, I began to fret and worry about how this would all work out. Did I have everything in order? Would he

really show up? Could I really do this? I emailed Lin. How wonderful to have a partner in this project. Lin "held my hand" through email and reassured me that all would be well. Our one little problem seemed to be the PSLA packet of information I was asked to give to Rep. Creighton; I didn't have it. We discovered this in time and it was in my hands for the big day.

About two and a half weeks before the visit I realized that I should have someone to greet our representative. Since my building is now K-4, I selected one top student from each of the four fourth grade classes to greet and tour our Mr. Creighton until it was time for the class he was to observe. I invited these students to have lunch with me in the library. We discussed the visit and reviewed information about Rep. Creighton. We also conversed about manners and what to do on the school tour.

I decided to invite teachers to create a short writing project about what students think is important about the library. I received short paragraphs from some of the first and second grade classes, which I placed in an envelope to go home with our representative. One first grade student added a special note: "PS good luck with the government."

The big day arrived. Rep. Creighton was early and I was between classes so I had the privilege of meeting him first. I headed out for my next class and the four selected students arrived to give their tour. I had selected the most outgoing and talkative group. They were terrific and delightful. Their tour ended in the library when it was time for our class. I was so intent on showing what we were doing that I almost missed a very important opportunity – the invitation to allow our representative to tell about himself and his job in Harrisburg. Rep. Creighton was great and the students were really interested in his comments about how a law is enacted.

Mr. Creighton was also wonderful as he interacted with students as they worked on the LSTA laptops researching their projects. He clearly made an effort to connect with as many students as possible, chatting with them about their topics. I could not have asked for a better situation.

We had the local cable station there to film and interview both Rep. Creighton and myself. The local newspaper was also there to document the occasion with photographs and I provided the information for the caption to the photo. Somehow everything took place within the time frame of forty-five minute class. Mr. Creighton and I even had time to go over the PSLA packet provided by the legislative committee and then it was time to go to lunch.

Our faculty has a special potluck luncheon each month so we scheduled it in April to coincide with the legislative visit. Some faculty members did interact with Representative Creighton but it was a time for the two of us to sit down and talk, make connections, and learn more about each other's job. Then it was over.

I wrote my reports, thank you notes, and listened to all of the people who were involved in the day. There truly was a glow of satisfaction and a feeling of "job well done." But this is not the end of the story. We are facing financial crisis at the state level and this non-political person is writing letters to various legislators, including Tom Creighton. The best part is this: I know that Tom Creighton knows my name. He has been to my library, he has seen what happens in one school and he has met my enthusiastic learners. I am less intimidated by the title of "Legislator" and I would invite one to my library again. Did his visit make a difference in how he votes? I can't tell you that but I believe that if all of us are willing to invite legislators into our schools and show them what our students are doing, together we can make a difference!

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