



# The Advocacy Playbook

## Proactive Legislation Strategies for State Associations



# Today's Presenters

Mr. David Jackson

Executive Director - Oklahoma Secondary School Activities Association

[djackson@ossaa.com](mailto:djackson@ossaa.com)

Mr. Michael Krueger, Ed.S., CMAA

Commissioner – Colorado High School Activities Association

[mkrueger@chsaa.org](mailto:mkrueger@chsaa.org)



# Any Of This Sound Familiar?

Phone Rings → "Have you seen House Bill 247? It would allow unrestricted transfer eligibility statewide. The hearing is next Tuesday. What is our position?"

Email → "The education committee is hearing a bill tomorrow regarding homeschool participation. Legislators are asking for our feedback. Do we have talking points?"

Text Message → "I just heard there is new legislation that would change how student-athletes can engage in NIL activities. Do we support it? Oppose it? What does it mean for our schools?"

Phone Rings Again → "Hey, a superintendent just called and said there is a bill that would limit the authority of state associations on eligibility decisions. Have we talked to anyone about this?"

Another Email → "A reporter just called asking for comment on legislation affecting transfer rules. The bill has already been filed and stakeholder groups are publicly taking positions."





# Today's Outcomes

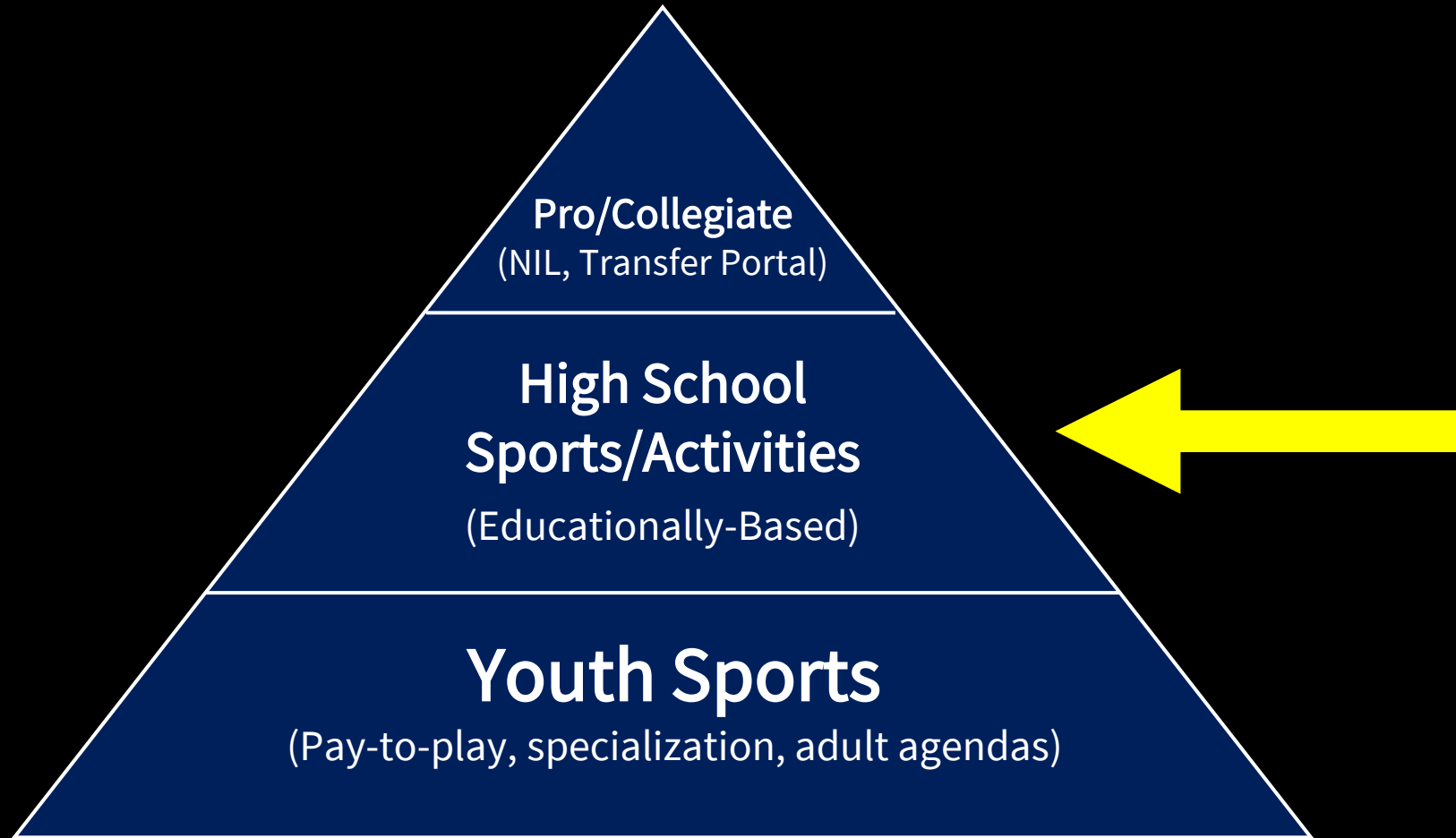
**By the end of this session, our hope is that you will:**

- 1. View legislative advocacy through a proactive lens; recognizing that the greatest opportunities to influence policy often occur long before a bill is introduced.**
- 2. Leave with a practical framework for action; applying the 4 R Model: Radar, Relationships, Reputation, and Response.**
- 3. Identify strategies for strengthening relationships with policymakers and stakeholders; positioning your association as a trusted and credible resource on issues affecting education-based activities.**
- 4. Consider how your association can better anticipate emerging policy issues; align stakeholder messaging, and engage in conversations before decisions are made.**
- 5. Walk away with at least one actionable step you can implement immediately; strengthening your association's voice, influence, and effectiveness in the legislative arena.**



# Protecting the Purpose

Defining, Defending, and Advancing Educationally Based Athletics  
The Current Landscape is Challenging



# Protecting the Purpose

## Defining, Defending, and Advancing Educationally Based Athletics

- Defining the Purpose
  - If we do not define our purpose, someone else will
  - To be honest, they (society) are already driving the narrative
- How are our member schools answering this question, “educationally based athletics & activities exists to...”
- The purpose of educationally based athletics and activities is to use participation as a platform for the holistic development of students physically, emotionally, socially, and morally.



# Protecting the Purpose

Defining, Defending, and Advancing Educationally Based Athletics

- The Scoreboard Fades...The Human Impact Does Not
- We are not in the business of sports and activities
- One more time for those in the back.... We are NOT in the business of sports and activities
- We ARE in the Business of developing young people through sports and activities





# Protecting the Purpose

Defining, Defending, and Advancing Educationally Based Activities

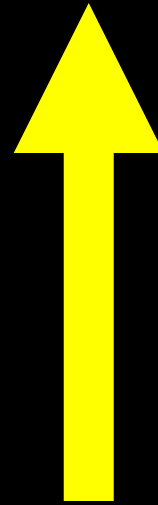
Working and supporting each other we must:

- Define it
- Defend it
- Advance it
- Because if we do not protect the purpose of educationally-based athletics & activities, society will define it for us
- Let's be accountable to each other as we unite in this effort!



# Let's Start Here

*"The best legislative advocacy happens before a bill is ever introduced."*



This

# The Reality

- For many us, legislative advocacy begins with one of those calls or emails. The problem is that by the time that call/email comes in, the conversation is already underway.
- Legislators have been meeting. Stakeholders have been organizing. Narratives have been forming. Someone has already been educating decision-makers.
- Policy is increasingly intersecting with education-based activities.
  - NIL
  - Transfers
  - Student eligibility
  - Participation access
  - Gender participation
  - Health and safety
  - Governance and oversight

# The Reality – Someone is already having the conversation

Before a bill is introduced:

- Concerns are being raised.
- Stakeholders are meeting.
- Narratives are forming.
- Legislators are learning.
- Opinions are developing.

Quick share-out:

- What issue challenged your association recently?
- When did you first become aware of it?
- Looking back, what warning signs existed?

# We Need A Better Approach

As much as we can → We need to move from “Reactive” to “Influential”

➤ Trying to move from - “How do we, should we, respond”

To

“How do we, can we, engage **before** legislation appears”

# The 4-R Model

**RADAR** → See it coming

**RELATIONSHIPS** → Build trust

**REPUTATION** → Earn Credibility

**RESPONSE** → Help shape outcomes



# Radar

A stylized radar background with concentric circles and a degree scale from 0 to 360. The word "Radar" is centered in a white, outlined font with a double underline. The background is dark blue with a grid of concentric circles and radial lines. A degree scale is visible around the perimeter, with numbers from 0 to 360 in increments of 10. Several bright blue dots are scattered across the radar grid, representing targets or data points.



# RADAR

## RADAR – See it coming

- Identify issues before they become Bills
- Monitor
  - Legislative committees
  - Education committees
  - Media trends
  - Advocacy groups
  - School concerns
  - National conversations
- Always be asking, “What is coming next?”





# RELATIONSHIPS

## RELATIONSHIPS – Build trust before you need it

- Relationships should exist:
  - Before legislation happens
  - Across party lines
  - With legislators
  - With legislative staff
  - With education partners
- You do not build influence during a legislative debate. You leverage influence that was built long before the debate began.
- Easier said that done right....The secret weapon → **Get a LOBBYIST**



# Let's Talk Lobbyists

- Truth is, you cannot monitor every conversation taking place in the State Capitol.
- A trusted lobbyist often serves as an extension of your association, helping identify issues, build relationships, and ensure you are aware of conversations long before a bill is introduced.
- **A good lobbyist helps you:**
  - **See issues earlier** - Identifies emerging legislation and policy discussions before they become public priorities.
  - **Expand your relationships** - Provides access to policymakers, legislative staff, and key decision-makers.
  - **Understand the political landscape** - Helps assess legislative interest, stakeholder positions, and potential outcomes.
  - **Avoid surprises** - Serves as an early warning system for issues that may impact schools and students.
  - **Strengthen your voice** - Ensures your association is part of the conversation when policy discussions begin.



# Let's Talk Lobbyists (cont...)

## The Best Lobbyists Do More Than Track Bills:

### ➤ They help associations:

- Build relationships before issues emerge.
- Understand the motivations behind proposals.
- Connect with the right policymakers.
- Provide strategic advice and context.
- Position the association as a trusted resource.

### ➤ The value of a lobbyist is not simply knowing when a bill is introduced. The value is knowing what conversations are occurring before a bill is introduced.

### Quick share-out:

### ➤ For those associations that utilize a lobbyist, what has been the greatest value beyond simply tracking legislation?



# REPUTATION

REPUTATION – Become THE trusted resource

- When policymakers have questions, do they call:
  - An advocacy group?
  - A media source?
  - A special interest?
  - ...OR
- Do they call Your Association (or lobbyist)?
- Do everything you can to establish that you are the ones to call.

- Stand by the Brand →



# REPUTATION

## Building Reputation

- Become known for:
  - Being available
  - Having credibility – (Never forget...YOU ARE THE EXPERT!)
  - Expertise
  - Objectivity
  - Student-centered leadership
  - Educational perspective
- Like we agreed at the start, if we (collectively) don't define the purpose others will!
- Our Reputation allows to be the best positioned to define our purpose!



# RESPONSE

## RESPONSE – When legislation appears...be ready:

- Notice that response is the fourth R, not the first.
- As associations we spend a significant amount of our energy on “response”.
- The strongest responses are possible because Radar, Relationships, and Reputation have already been established. When legislation appears, you are not introducing yourself, explaining your credibility, or trying to build consensus from scratch. You are simply activating relationships, trust, and information that already exist.



# RESPONSE

**RESPONSE** – When legislation appears...be ready:

➤ Instead of scrambling to understand the issue, you already have:

- **Established Relationships** - Policymakers and key stakeholders know who you are and view your association as a trusted partner.
- **Credibility and Trust** - Your association is recognized as a reliable source of information and expertise.
- **Aligned Stakeholders** - Schools, administrators, coaches, and partners understand the issue and can communicate a consistent message.
- **Clear Messaging** - Your position is focused on student impact, educational outcomes, and practical implementation.
- **Situational Awareness** - You understand the issue, the key players, and the potential implications before the conversation reaches a critical stage.

➤ You're playing chess....



# RESPONSE - Messaging

## RESPONSE – Let's talk messaging

### ➤ Effective messaging

- The most influential associations do not lead with their position:
- They lead with their **Purpose!**

### ➤ Lead with:

- **Students** - How will this impact the experiences, opportunities, and well-being of students?
- **Member Schools** - What are the practical implications for schools, administrators, coaches, and communities?
- **Educational Outcomes** - How does this support or impact learning, leadership development, citizenship, character, and student growth?
- **Participation Opportunities** - Will this expand, limit, enhance, or create barriers to participation in education-based activities?
- And **ALWAYS** lead with and come back to → **Our Educationally-Based Mission** - Does this align with the purpose of education-based athletics and activities? Does it support the values that make our programs different from youth, club, recreational, collegiate, or professional sports?





# RESPONSE - Messaging

## RESPONSE – Let's talk messaging

### ➤ Avoid leading with:

- **Political Framing**

- *"This is a Republican issue"*
- *"This is a Democratic issue."*

- **Organizational Self-Interest**

- *"This will make our jobs harder."*
- *"This impacts our authority."*

- **Defensiveness**

- *"They don't understand what we do."*

- **Emotion-Driven Responses**

- Reacting before fully understanding the issue and its implications.

### ➤ The moment our messaging becomes about politics, authority, or organizational interests, we lose what makes our voice unique. Our greatest strength is our ability to speak on behalf of students, schools, and the educational value of participation.



# RESPONSE - Messaging

- One of the greatest strengths state associations bring to policy discussions is our ability to remind decision-makers that athletics and activities are not ends in themselves; they are educational experiences.
- What makes our work unique is that participation is a vehicle for learning, leadership development, citizenship, character, belonging, and personal growth.
- When discussing legislation, we should consistently bring the conversation back to that educational purpose.
- No matter what the legislation is addressing → NIL, transfers, eligibility, safety, etc...

**Our response should always connect back to:**

*“What is best for students and how does this support the educational mission of athletics and activities?”*

- Our most compelling argument is not about sports. It is about the educational value of participation.



# RESPONSE - Messaging

## Messaging that Builds Influence:

- Instead of saying → “We oppose this bill.”  
Try This → “We appreciate the goal of this legislation and would like to share potential impacts on students, schools, and participation opportunities.”
- Instead of saying → “We disagree with this legislation.”  
Try This → “We share the same goal and would like to discuss alternative approaches that may better support students, schools, and communities.”
- Instead of saying → “Legislators don’t understand how high school athletics work.”  
➤ Try This → “We welcome the opportunity to provide additional context regarding how educationally-based athletics and activities currently operate.”
- Instead of saying → “This legislation is really unnecessary.”  
➤ Try This → “We appreciate the concerns that prompted this proposal and would like to share existing policies and practices that may already address those concerns.”
- Instead of saying → “This Bill Sucks!”  
➤ Try This → “Actually, I really can’t come up with a nicer way to say this...your Bill actually does Suck!”



# RESPONSE - Messaging

## Key Takeaways:

- Influence is earned through how we communicate
- Policymakers are more likely to engage when associations:
  - Educate rather than advocate
  - Inform rather than criticize
  - Offer solutions rather than objections
  - Focus on students rather than themselves
- Legislators are not necessarily looking for another opinion. They are looking for trusted expertise.
- The most influential message is rarely, “Here is what is best for our association.” The most influential message is, “Here is what is best for students and schools, and here is why.”



# The Advocacy Playbook – The Toolkit

## Radar – Create Your Early Warning System (know what’s coming)

- ✓ Subscribe to legislative alerts
- ✓ Monitor education committee agendas
- ✓ Follow key advocacy organizations
- ✓ Monitor national trends affecting high school athletics
- ✓ Ask yourself regularly → “What issue is likely to become legislation in the next 12-24 months?”
- ✓ Key **Toolkit** Takeaway → **Don’t just monitor bills. Monitor conversations.**

## Relationships – Build Trust Before You Need It

- ✓ Identify 5-10 key legislators in your state
- ✓ Know committee chairs and vice chairs
- ✓ Build relationships with legislative staff
- ✓ Invite policymakers to championships and events
- ✓ Schedule meetings when there is no issue to discuss
- ✓ Key **Toolkit** Takeaway → **The best time to build a relationship is when you do not need anything**



# The Advocacy Playbook – The Toolkit (cont...)

## Reputation – Become The First Call

- ✓ Share participation data
- ✓ Provide student success stories
- ✓ Communicate proactively
- ✓ Be responsive and accessible
- ✓ Become known for objectivity and expertise
- ✓ Ask yourself → “When policymakers have questions about high school activities, are we the first call they make?”
- ✓ Key **Toolkit** Takeaway → **Influence follows credibility**

## Response – Be Prepared Before The Issue Arrives

- ✓ Develop core talking points in advance
- ✓ Create a stakeholder communication plan
- ✓ Identify spokespersons
- ✓ Align board and staff messaging
- ✓ Focus every message on students and schools
- ✓ Key **Toolkit** Takeaway → **The strongest responses are prepared before legislation is introduced.**

# The Advocacy Playbook

## Let's Bring It Home:

- Legislation will come and go
  - Bills will be introduced, policies will change, issues will emerge.
- Our Responsibility Remains The Same - To help decision-makers understand:
  - The value of education-based athletics and activities.
  - The impact they have on students, schools, and communities.
  - The purpose that makes our work unique.
- **We Must Define and Protect Our Purpose**
- The Best Legislative Advocacy Happens Before a Bill Is Ever Introduced:  
Remember → Radar • Relationships • Reputation • Response



# Open Forum Q & A

What's on your mind?





*Thank You!*



## The Advocacy Playbook

Proactive Legislation Strategies  
for State Associations



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