

How to Champion Youth in Your State Capital

by Monika Wierzbicki

Struggling for economic prosperity is difficult for everyone—and especially hard for those who have never learned how to plan to achieve financial security. What we face today, confirmed by poor financial literacy test scores from across the country, is that consumers are spending too much and saving too little. And as we know, youth are particularly vulnerable.

Michigan has roughly 430 credit unions with a total of more than 4.4 million members. That represents roughly 40% of the state's population, with continued projected growth. To serve them, credit union advocates must speak with a strong and clear voice about the importance of financial literacy to our local, state, and federal officials.

Build influence locally

To best communicate any message to lawmakers, start in your local community. Playing an active local role is critical to successful advocacy. Your message must be accurate, loud, and clear to build a network of support.

First, stay informed and know your facts. Keep up with current events that have an effect on your efforts, as well as the financial services industry. For a particular issue, become familiar with and be prepared to give strong evidence to refute opposing arguments.

Second, get others interested by engaging them in events that support your issue or cause in your commu-

nity. Third, write to the editors of your local newspapers, listen and call in to radio talk shows, and testify at public hearings. Working with other organizations affected by an issue sends a powerful message to people in positions to help that there is

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widespread interest in your cause.

Elected officials care about the people who put them in office. This is why it's critical to communicate your message and build positive relationships. Most elected officials hold district hours, have toll-free

telephone numbers, and provide office contact information in their newsletters.

In this age of term limits, it is especially important to get to know your legislators personally. Find out what committees they serve on, what issues are important to them, what legislation they've introduced, their backgrounds and their interests outside of elected office. Invite them to speak or attend your local functions.

Get to know the legislator's staff as well. Don't be surprised or discouraged to learn that you'll be meeting with a staff member. Often, unanticipated votes or meetings call your legislator away from your scheduled meeting. A relationship with a staff member can often be as important as the one you establish with a legislator. Thank the staff whenever they have helped you, such as by setting up a meeting or helping you to lobby by their boss. Mention them, if appropriate, in a thank you letter to the legislator after your meeting or after an important vote.

Prepare a comprehensive plan

The Michigan Credit Union League (MCUL) and its member credit unions are committed to providing financial education as part of their overall objective to help improve individual economic security. Michigan credit unions teach financial literacy to more than 55,000 students annually.

Preparations for "Youth Financial Literacy Month" begin with planning



(Left to right) Lori Bahnmueller, vice president of Association Services, MCUL, Michigan state Rep. Marc Shulman, and Michigan state Rep. Brian Palmer, 2 of 12 legislators who accepted the league's "Challenge to Lawmakers" to team-teach financial education in a classroom.

the previous fall. Last year's plan consisted of three parts. First, the league offered a "Challenge to Lawmakers." The MCUL partnered with leaders of the Michigan state Senate and House to encourage state legislators to team up with credit union staff during the month of April to co-present financial education curriculum in the classroom.

To garner participation, league staff hand-delivered to each Michigan lawmaker a personal invitation that included an information kit for the High School Financial Planning Program® (HSFPP) from the National Endowment for Financial Education® (NEFE). In all, 12 lawmakers teamed up with credit union staff to teach the HSFPP or visit a student-run credit union branch during the month of April. The league also secured participation from Michigan Office of Financial and Insurance Services Commissioner Linda Watters.

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The MCUL joined the Detroit branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago and 28 other organizations to host a 10-day financial literacy blitz. The MCUL and 19 credit unions hosted more than 30 educational seminars, many geared toward youth. And, finally, the league worked with Michigan State Universi-

ty Extension to provide free teacher training for the HSFPP.

Advocate change

In 2002, MCUL advocated a law requiring financial education in Michigan's classrooms. Public Act 111 (originally state Rep. Michael Bishop's HB 5327) requires the Michigan Department of Education to develop or adopt one or more model programs for youth financial education. The law also maintains that if federal funds are available to support financial education, the Education Department must use those funds for grants to public schools and for other measures that provide incentives for adopting financial education programs. For this work, Rep. Bishop became the first lawmaker to receive CUNA's Desjardins Youth Financial Education Award.

Together, these initiatives were a part of the larger scope of promoting, educating and creating awareness among elected officials, teachers, the press and the public of the problem of youth financial literacy.

As you can see, there are many steps to champion the importance of financial literacy. As credit union advocates, we all stand to benefit when our message is heard and supported in our communities, state capitals, and on Capitol Hill.

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