



CHAPTER HANDBOOK

Congratulations on starting a NYRA Chapter! In this handbook you'll find information on how to run a chapter, make a campaign plan, and select the best tactics to meet your goals.

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STARTING A NYRA CHAPTER

Our Chapters are an important part of NYRA and play an essential role in the fight for youth rights. As a NYRA Chapter, you will focus on changing laws and policies in schools, communities, and at the state and federal levels. You will also have the opportunity to educate the public about issues that affect all young people by challenging age discrimination and prejudice young people face in our daily lives.

You can use your NYRA Chapter to work on a variety of issues, whether it's lowering the voting age, fighting a local curfew, or repealing your school's uniform policy. NYRA Chapters also organize events to raise awareness around ageism through protests, rallies, or informational meetings. You can also use your chapter to bring together people who can support each other to be effective activists. NYRA Chapters can be school-based or community-based. They can be intergenerational or made up entirely of young people. Some chapters start from scratch; others are well-established groups that want the extra support from NYRA.

We provide our chapters with personalized, on-call guidance and support from our Outreach Coordinators.

REGISTERING YOUR CHAPTER

Whether you are starting a completely new group or registering a group that already exists, you should fill out our [Chapter Application Form](#) to get started. You should have at least one person selected to act as a contact person for your chapter. You will also be encouraged to pick out a chapter name. Chapters are usually named after the school, town, or county they are located in. If your group already has a name, you can continue using it. Once we receive your application, one of our Outreach Coordinators will contact you.

You don't need to be fully formed or have your first meeting yet to register - we will take you through that process. And if you don't have other people interested, we'll give you some ideas on how to get the word out and encourage people to become members.

CHAPTER RESPONSIBILITIES

When you register to be a NYRA Chapter, you are acknowledging responsibility for the following:

1. Running a Campaign

This will be the main responsibility of your chapter and will be the focus of most of your time and energy. We help chapters tackle a wide array of youth rights issues, and your chapter is free to work on any campaign you choose to, as long as it fits with NYRA's mission and is approved by your Outreach Coordinator. Most campaigns will work on both creating awareness on a issue and changing a policy or law.

2. Managing the Chapter

Chapter management includes finding new members, becoming an officially registered group at your school, running meetings, and letting others know about your chapter's accomplishments.

Much of this work is connected to running a campaign. For example, if you host an informational meeting about your issue, you should use that opportunity to sign up new members to your chapter as well. Likewise, much of the work that focuses on having your chapter run smoothly, such as facilitating a meeting, will be an essential part of an effective campaign.

3. Representing NYRA

While NYRA chapters are independent entities, they do represent the organization as whole and should only take on issues that address age discrimination or prejudice. Chapters are also required to abide by NYRA's mission and follow our anti-discrimination policy.

Chapters are also not allowed to speak out against any position that NYRA holds. For example, a chapter may work on lowering the voting age in a town that also has a curfew affecting people under 18. That chapter is not obligated to work on the curfew law as well (although many chapters have taken on both of these issues). However, the chapter should not speak out in favor of the curfew, as this goes against NYRA's official position on juvenile curfews. If you have any questions about NYRA's positions, please talk to your Outreach Coordinator.

Chapters are also prevented from engaging in violence or any other activity that would damage NYRA's image.

4. Staying Connected with NYRA's National Office

When you register your chapter, you will be contacted by a NYRA Outreach Coordinator. Your coordinator will help you get in touch with other members in your area, help you come up with a campaign plan, and walk you through the next steps. You are responsible for staying in contact with your Outreach Coordinator regularly, at least once a month.

MANAGING YOUR CHAPTER

Making Decisions

Whether your chapter consists of two people or 35, you will need to figure out how to make decisions. There are many places (such as school) where one person makes all the decisions for everyone else. But this isn't much fun, so your first goal will be to determine how to make decisions that involve as many people as you can, without spending so much time debating that you don't have time to move on to the action stage.

Most groups will make the big decisions at their meetings, often by voting on a proposal after discussing it. Some groups choose to pass a proposal if everyone agrees (consensus decision-making), while others will only require a majority of the group to agree (democratic decision-making or voting). There are pros and cons to each method, and what you choose may largely depend on the dynamics and personalities of your members. What you don't want is to just have one person or a small group or clique making all the decisions without input from other chapter members.

Well-functioning chapters make all members feel that their contributions are important. Encourage group members to share their perspectives, encourage equitable participation, and check in regularly to see if the process is working for the group. The most important piece is that everyone feels listened to. Encourage collaboration.

Two important things to keep in mind when making a group decision are whether it's controversial (if many chapter members have strong opinions about it one way or the other) and whether it's important.

- If a decision is both important and controversial, it is best to have a large group discussion until you reach something close to a majority, to make sure that everyone's voices are heard.
- If a decision is controversial but unimportant, it is best to have a small group or subcommittee split off to discuss it, since it will take a long time to make the decision, but it's not worth wasting the entire chapter's time on.
- If a decision is important but not controversial, it's best to have a simple majority vote with the full chapter since members will want to impact the decision, but won't care about it enough that it's worth taking up time to discuss.
- If a decision isn't important or controversial, assign it to a member with a specific position.

Assigning Tasks and Responsibilities

Your next task will be to develop a system for assigning tasks and responsibilities. This is so everyone knows who is doing what and you don't duplicate each other's work. (You only need one person to contact the media, for example.)

Make a list of possible tasks

Here are some tasks that chapters might need at the beginning:

- Organizing meetings (e.g. picking a time when everyone can make it, picking a room)
- Facilitating the meeting (e.g. making sure everyone gets a chance to speak)
- Reaching out to other groups
- Taking notes
- Managing the chapter's funds (e.g. if your group does any fundraising or is given a school budget, someone will need to keep track of those funds.)
- Promoting your chapter on social media
- Working with the media (e.g. being available to conduct interviews)
- Welcoming new members and getting their contact information

Remember this list can change as your chapter grows and takes on new campaigns.

Form a committee if needed

Sometimes it might make sense to group tasks together and form committees to work on them. Committees are usually just a few people that might be responsible for something specific, such as planning an event. You can form a committee when you want to do work outside of the meeting, but the job is too big for one person to do alone.

Assign each task

Dividing up tasks helps everyone to feel included, makes the work easier, and also helps ensure that your group continues if some members leave. Remember that everyone has a role to play. Including people helps them feel responsible for your group's success.

It is always best to get input from your members about how they want to help and what skills they can each contribute. Instead of having one person assigning positions, it may be best to let everyone choose specific tasks they want to do and then give them positions based on the work they're doing already.

You might not have enough people to do all those roles, so people can have multiple responsibilities as long as they can follow through on them.

When you assign tasks or form committees, make sure the following gets addressed:

- **What is the person or committee responsible for?**
- **How and when does the person or committee report back to the chapter?**
Agree on a schedule when you will check in to review progress (every week, two weeks, after each task, etc.)
- **What types of decisions, if any, can the person or committee make on its own without getting approval from the larger group?** Some chapters may only allow committees to research or recommend an action, while others may require them to report back only when the work is done. How you do this will be up to your chapter.

Rotate tasks

While one person or committee may be responsible for a particular area, it's important that the work doesn't fall on one person and that someone else can step in if someone gets overwhelmed or needs help. You can also rotate roles on more frequently - by having a different facilitator and note-taker every meeting, for example.

Providing Support and Useful Feedback

After assigning tasks, you'll want to have a system for making sure the tasks get done. It may make sense to assign someone the job of checking in with others and making sure things are going smoothly, especially for new members. However, this person does not need to have any authority over the others reporting to them, and should primarily act as a support person. Supporting chapter members means ensuring that people have

the help and resources they need to do their job the best way they can and are able to ask for help if they need it. People in your chapter should feel comfortable providing feedback to each other. When you check in with people or provide feedback you should:

- **Be positive.** Focus on what they are doing right and avoid complaining. People shouldn't feel bad or anxious if they didn't do what they said they would.
- **Ask questions and be an active listener.** Ask them how the work is going, including what is going well and what they are having trouble with. Ask them what they think the solution is or what changes need to be made.
- **Don't micromanage.** Helping people get things done isn't the same as telling them exactly how to do it or doing the work for them.
- **Make yourself available for follow-up.** Often when people hear feedback they'll want more clarification later. Let them know that you are available to support them and how they can get a hold of you.

Meetings

Meetings serve many purposes - getting everyone up to speed on who is doing what, planning the next steps, and making sure tasks don't fall through the cracks. Meetings can also be a time to get to know each other better, build morale, socialize, inspire each other, and have fun! It's a good idea to have a regular schedule for your meetings. Most chapters meet once a week or every other week. Having food is also a good idea and can strengthen the chapter's community if members volunteer to pitch in.

Making an agenda

An agenda is the plan for what you are going to discuss at the meeting and the order you are going to discuss it. It helps people stay on track so that the meeting doesn't drag on or people go off on too many tangents (although it should be flexible enough to allow for discussion of things that come up). If you can, it is a good idea to make the agenda available to people before they come to the meeting so they know what to expect.

Things to include in your agenda:

- A review from last meeting - what has been done since then
- Any announcements or things that have come up
- A list of tasks that should be done before the next meeting and who will take responsibility for them
- A plan for when you'll meet next

- You can also use your agenda for taking notes. Share notes with the members who couldn't make the meeting.

Facilitating a meeting

- Start on time. You can wait a few minutes for people to show up, but if you wait too long people will think they can show up late because the meetings don't start on time.
- Consider having an icebreaker or check-in question.
- Pass around a sign-up sheet asking people for their contact info. This will allow you to generate an email list and keep track of how many people are attending meetings.
- Stick to the agenda. Meetings that get off track are often unproductive.
- Include time to welcome new members, introduce them, find out their interests, and inform them about your group.
- Be flexible. Sometimes important issues arise that cannot wait to be addressed.
- Encourage participation. Balance those members who tend to talk all the time with those who speak infrequently or only when asked.
- This is the best time to assign task and responsibilities. Keep track of who has committed to what, and follow up with those members.
- Be positive and enthusiastic.

Communicating Outside of Meetings

Develop an efficient system of communication for your chapter. Sometimes that's email, but it can also be group texting, Facebook Messenger, or another free program like Slack.

Use this way of communicating to remind people of the next meeting and of their commitments, and to thank each other for your work. If you keep your notes online, you can provide them to the people who were absent. You can also use this as a way for people to add things to the agenda that they wish to discuss. It is important to communicate with members individually to show them that they're an essential part of the team. Give everyone some sort of responsibility for each meeting so they feel obligated to show up. If there isn't any advocacy work you can give them, give them another responsibility such as bringing food, giving people rides or reserving the meeting space.

PROMOTING YOUR CHAPTER

Telling people about your chapter and recruiting new members is a crucial step in making sure your chapter is sustainable. Most of the work in promoting your chapter will be closely tied to your campaign, but here are some general tips.

Recruitment and Involvement of New Members

- **Create a good first impression.** Make sure newcomers see that you are organized, have effective meetings, and are excited about your work.
- **Be friendly and inclusive.** People join groups partially because they care about the issue, but also as a way to socialize and make new friends with common interests.
- **Actively recruit new and younger members.** As a youth-led organization, it is important that your chapter constantly encourages new members. This is especially true for school-based chapters, where members will eventually graduate.
- **Incorporate newcomers into your chapter right away.** Take the time to find out what brought them to your event and identify their interests, skills, connections to other groups, availability, and how to stay in contact with them. Encourage people to take on responsibilities to make them feel included.
- **Make sure your chapter involves people from a diverse set of backgrounds.** This is important to the success of your chapter, because certain issues may go unaddressed if the same type of voices are heard over and over again. People have very different relationships with their schools or parents, or may have personal experiences that will help to inform how your chapter handles where ageism intersects with other issues such as racism or mental health.
- **Follow up with everyone within a week of any event, and thank them for their participation.** Ask what they liked, how they see themselves getting involved in the future, etc. Let everyone know that you value their perspective and are interested in their involvement.

Registering as a School Group

Many NYRA chapters decide to register as an official group with their school or college. This isn't a requirement, but depending on your school, you can get many benefits - such as a place to meet, a way to promote your group through school announcements and club fairs, resources to organize events, and a budget.

If you become an official group, you might be required to have a faculty advisor. Faculty advisors can help you interact with your school's administration, recruit new members, and be a valuable member of your team.

Look up the rules and benefits of becoming an official school group to see if it is right for you. Your Outreach Coordinator can help you with this process.

MAKING A CAMPAIGN PLAN

Before you dive into managing a campaign, you should make a campaign plan, which is your strategy for creating change in your school or community. Your campaign plan will help you figure out how to choose an issue, identify goals, and select which tactics will be the most effective.

STEP 1: CHOOSE YOUR ISSUE

Examples: Voting rights for young people; student decision-making at school

Many chapters already know which issues they want to work on, but for others it can be useful to start thinking about what issues people in your community care about. As long as the issue fits with NYRA's mission of challenging age discrimination and prejudice, chapters can pick their own issues to focus on. Your Outreach Coordinator will give you guidance on what issues NYRA covers.

You can work on as many issues as you want. Working on more than one issue has the advantage of spreading your message further as people who might only be interested in one topic will hear about other youth rights issues through your work. This can also help people understand how multiple problems are caused by age discrimination. However, making change around even one issue is difficult, so you may prefer to focus your time and effort toward one issue to maximize your impact. If you do take on multiple issues, you should budget your time and resources so that you can run each campaign effectively. You can also try to pick issues that naturally go together: You might be trying to change a school policy that is set by the school board and also want to work on lowering the voting age so that students can vote for school board members and hold them accountable.

Support from others in your school or community will be critical for your success, so if you are undecided which issue(s) to take on, a short opinion poll could be helpful in determining what level of support exists for various issues. Surveys can help you determine which issues are most popular as well as help you do outreach in your community.

Whether you've already decided on an issue or are still at the brainstorming stage, you should be clear about why this issue is important and why people should care about it. **Try to identify how this issue negatively affects young people, both in general and in your local community, and how your community would be improved if this issue was resolved.** Be clear about your reasons for seeking change and learn more about the arguments that support your position (lots of which can be found on NYRA's website).

STEP 2: IDENTIFY YOUR GOALS

***Examples:** Repeal the juvenile curfew in your town; reduce penalties for underage drinking on campus*

Now that you've chosen an issue, you need to think of the specific change you want to see. People who hear about your campaign will ask you, "What are you trying to achieve?" Your answer to that question is your **primary goal**.

However, you should also identify **secondary goals**. Secondary goals can be smaller goals that are easier to achieve and can act as stepping stones to the bigger goal. An example of this might be having a moratorium on a school policy until you can replace it with something better, such as getting your school to adopt alternative disciplinary measures while campaigning to abolish corporal punishment in your state.

Secondary goals can also act as back-up goals if your initial goal becomes unachievable. For example, your city council may refuse to abolish curfews entirely. But maybe you can get them to agree to make the curfew later or to make sure there are exceptions to the law. While compromising can feel like you failed at your original goal, it is still a victory that can still improve the situation.

Once you've identified some potential goals, you can evaluate them by considering the following:

Route to Success

Your route to success is what needs to happen in order for you to achieve your goal. For example, if you want to get rid of your school's dress code, you will need to find out the how the current policy can be overturned. If you are working on lowering the voting age, you'll need to find out whether your city or town has the ability to change the voting age for local elections, or whether you need to go to the state level. We can help you research laws specific to your area.

Decision-Makers

Once you outline a route to success, you should be able to identify the precise decision-makers involved. This will not only help you know who to contact, but will help you figure out which tactics will be most likely to be successful. For example, if you are trying to change a law, you want to work with your representatives and learn about what issues they are interested in. Or if the school policy you are trying to remove was implemented by an unpopular administration, you can use that to increase your support among teachers and parents. When possible, it is usually better to maintain a positive relationship with decision-makers to maximize the likelihood of their cooperation. However, you should not feel be afraid of confronting them.

Obstacles

Undoubtedly, your route to success will have barriers along the way, and it is helpful to identify them so you're prepared. Obstacles can be both internal (such as your chapter doesn't have many members and you all have busy schedules) or external (your school board only meets once every two months). They can be things like not having enough money, a difficult principal, or people's ageist attitudes.

Potential Allies

While other people directly affected by your issue are obvious potential supporters, you should also think about potential allies in other areas. In fact, many youth rights issues have been championed by people who had never previously heard of the youth rights movement. For example, groups that advocate for voting rights in general might also be interested in lowering the voting age, and people concerned about policing may also be concerned about juvenile curfews. Try to find out whether any work has been done on this issue in your community already.

Current and Needed Resources

You should think about which resources you have currently and which resources you need to get. Resources include anything from posters for a protest, a venue for meeting and holding workshops, or connections to other organizations.

Once you've identified what you need to do to accomplish your goal, you will have a better idea of your likelihood of success. Of course, just because a goal seems difficult to achieve doesn't mean you shouldn't choose it. It can be exciting to take on a challenge. But you should make sure that people don't feel discouraged or that your resources would be more valuably spent elsewhere.

STEP 3: SELECT TACTICS

Examples: Testify in front of the school board; plan a school walkout; organize a teach-in to raise awareness

Now that you have a goal, you'll need to figure out how to accomplish it. This will be the biggest part of your plan. Later, in the Activist Toolkit section, you'll find details about how to implement different tactics, but here we'll talk about how to select which tactics are available, and evaluate them so that you can choose the best ones for your particular situation. Before you select a tactic you should consider the following:

- **Will this tactic help build your chapter?** You'll want to use tactics that are enjoyable and that will encourage others to participate. Tactics should also help people feel positive about your chapter and build cohesion in your group. If people get bored with one tactic, switch it up!
- **Will you be able to sustain this tactic if there are negative consequences?** Some tactics, especially those that take place in school, come with the risk of punishment. For example, some schools have suspended students for boycotting standardized tests, and have also attempted to fire the teachers and fine the parents who support them. You should try to predict potential risks so that you don't have to abandon a tactic before you're ready.
- **Does this tactic show a positive image of youth leadership?** Your tactics should be youth-led and challenge negative stereotypes against young people. If you do this, even if you don't achieve your goal, you have accomplished something worthwhile.
- **How will this tactic look to people outside your chapter?** Depending on the tactics you choose, people will have different reactions to your campaign as

some tactics are more likely to polarize your community than others. For example, some teachers and parents might support you testifying to the school board about your dress code, but wouldn't be supportive of a school walkout protesting it. Of course, this doesn't mean you shouldn't organize a school walkout, as they have lots of other benefits, but it is something to be aware of.

- **Do you have the support and resources needed to make this tactic a success?** While there are many things that one person can do, some tactics will work better depending on your level of support. For example, a business owner probably won't listen to a few dissatisfied customers, but they will likely listen to a mass outcry from the neighborhood and any disagreement with your school's administration should seek support from teachers and parents. You should also make sure you have the needed resources for this particular tactic, such as posters, flyers, or a good social media following to get the word out. If the success of a tactic relies on significant resources, consider whether you can tweak the tactic to use less, but still achieve at least part of your goal. Let your Outreach Coordinator know if you need any materials.
- **What tactic will you do if this tactic fails?** It is a good idea to have a backup plan in case things don't go the way you want. You should also figure out when to keep fighting or change tactics (or even your goal).

ACTIVIST TOOLKIT

We've put together a list of different tactics you may considering using. There are many more that aren't listed and you are definitely encouraged to come up with your own. Be sure to include multiple tactics in your strategy so you can reach as many people as possible, and ditch tactics that aren't working to give you a higher chance of success.

(If you prefer, you can access our toolkit through our website:

<https://www.youthrights.org/action/toolkit/>)

HOW TO BE A SPOKESPERSON FOR YOUTH RIGHTS

The prospect of publicly standing up for youth rights may seem daunting at first, but there are many ways to spread awareness and encourage people to get involved. Talking to your neighbor, your senator or representative, or giving a class presentation

are just a few of the opportunities to spread the message about youth rights or a specific campaign.

Elements of being a successful spokesperson

Whether someone is listening to you for a few minutes or an hour, your goal is to give them an understanding of the problems facing young people and motivate them to take action. Here are some things to keep in mind when discussing youth rights in front of an audience:

- **State the problem.** It is important that your listeners understand the issue at hand. Provide enough background information about the topic to educate and engage them. It might also be useful to use resources from the NYRA website or from other reputable organizations, since many in the audience will be unfamiliar with the subject. In turn, they can educate others with these resources in the future.
- **Tell a personal story.** Telling your personal story helps people connect with you. Research shows that people remember personal stories more than statistics. Try to include the following information:
 - Why you care about the issue/community you're discussing;
 - How the issue affects you;
 - Why you joined NYRA;
 - Why people you know are involved in the campaign;
 - What it would mean to you personally if change was implemented.
- **Learn a few talking points.** These can be statistics, quotes, or other facts. Try to keep them relevant and memorable, so that your listeners don't become bored or confused. With simple yet important facts, your audience will be prepared to take action and share this information with others in the future.
- **Offer solutions.** People don't just want to hear about the problem. They also want to know how they can get involved. This may involve a simple request (signing a petition, for example) or a more direct call to action (like participating in a protest). This call to action will depend on the topic and type of resources available in your area.
- **Respond to questions.** Ask questions to keep your listeners engaged, and listen to their questions as well. This makes it easier for youth rights issues to resonate with them, since their views and thoughts are being respected. Input can be solicited from larger audiences as well by asking for shows of hands or requesting that a volunteer offer an opinion. You may be asked basic questions such as, "How am I supposed to make a difference as a young person?" This

should be a topic you address beforehand, but be prepared to further outline the ways in which youth can get involved.

- **Anticipate criticism.** The key to being a good spokesperson is having knowledge on an array of youth rights issues. You don't have to be expert on all topics, but you should certainly understand the basics - for example, what ageism is, and why young people should be given more rights in general. You want your listeners to consider you a credible source of information. You will, however, most certainly come across skeptics who disagree with your cause. Be prepared to address this criticism by reiterating the most important points of your argument, and why this particular issue is so crucial to youth.

Everyday opportunities

Everyday, there are ways that you can spread awareness about youth rights. You might reach out to friends, family members, and even neighbors in person to discuss a certain issue. You can take advantage of social media by posting a relevant article or petition online. In some cases, you may even be able to give a presentation at school. This type of outreach is valuable because it will reach a large audience of young people. If able, you can choose a youth rights topic that fits the requirements of an assignment; otherwise, you may need to reach out to educators to obtain permission for your presentation.

Workshops and small groups

In workshops and small groups, you can have substantive discussions with other people interested in your cause. Friends from your school could gather for an informal brainstorming session or workshop, but depending on the topic and level of interest in your area, it may be difficult to form such a group to meet in person. However, with social media you can easily create online groups or blogs to enlist people from all over the country who want to help. For example, a discussion group on Facebook may allow you to share ideas about activism and education with youth advocates from all sorts of backgrounds and experiences. You can also use other social media like Discord, Instagram, and Snapchat to connect with small groups of allies.

Formal speeches with larger groups

Large groups at conventions and conferences also have their place. There are many topics in youth rights that can be tailored to specific audiences. For example, you could talk at an education conference about [school issues](#), to a parenting group about

youth-friendly parenting, to a political group about [lowering the voting age](#), or to the city council about why [curfews](#) are ineffective and should be abolished.

Planning events as a spokesperson:

1. **Choose and reserve a venue.** It should be easy to access for your audience and appropriate for the expected size of the crowd.
2. **Write speech(es) and/or short pitch(es).** This can be an outline at first, and you can refine it gradually if you have “writer’s block.”
3. **Practice** in front of a mirror or people you know (depending on the type of speech/outreach). Make notes of any suggestions for improvement.
4. **Be prepared to answer questions on youth rights in general.** Remember, you should be a credible spokesperson.
5. **Always be presentable and ready** to distribute materials to any interested person, and collect contact information. For anything other than a one-on-one talk with someone you already know, you should dress presentably, bring a sign-up sheet with you, and hand out flyers or other materials to anyone who shows an interest in youth rights issues. If you don’t make connections, your audience will be “lost” in most cases. This applies for any type of outreach.
6. **Gather necessary materials.** Print out written materials in advance and make sure you have a working laptop or flash drive. Ensure you know what is available in your presentation room and what you need to bring. If possible, test out the presentation room in advance and make sure you know what to do.
7. **Arrange for/bring refreshments (optional).** Offer free food, if you can. This works wonders at any meeting, especially if advertised on flyers.

WORKING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

In many cases, advancing youth rights requires a change in the law, which means working with politicians. While this can seem overwhelming, it’s important to remember that it is an elected official’s job to respond to the needs and concerns of the people they represent, including those who aren’t yet able to vote. Here you’ll find how to contact your representative through phone calls, letters, and how to meet with them in person.

Who to Contact

Before contacting anyone, you have to figure out what are you asking them to do. Is it to create new legislation or to support something already proposed? Is it something within their power to change? At what level of government are your efforts going to have the

most impact? Most representatives are only interested in hearing from people who live in their district, but occasionally it might be a good idea to reach out to politicians that have shown support or concern for similar issues. For example, if you are working on lowering the voting age, you can reach out to politicians who have supported voting rights in general.

How to Find Your Representative

Finding the people that represent you is as easy as knowing your address. Here are some helpful websites:

At the federal level

- [Contacting the White House](#)
- [Finding your US Senators](#)
- [Finding your US Representative](#)

At the state level

- [Finding your State Legislature](#)
- [Finding your State Governor](#)

At the city or county level

- [Finding your Local Government](#)
- [Finding your Local Mayor](#)
- You may also need to search specifically for your city or county's website

Most elected officials have a preferred way to contact them, and this should be found on their web page. (Some have different addresses whether the legislative chamber is in session or not, for example.)

When to Contact

Contacting your representatives consistently throughout the year can show that your issue matters to you. However, many state legislatures don't meet for months at a time, so if you want your representative to introduce or support a bill, you should be aware of the legislative session dates in your state. Here are two resources to help you:

- [State Legislative Session Calendar](#)
- [State Legislative Session Dates](#)

Making Phone Calls

Phone calls are the most useful when an issue or bill is under current consideration and are considered more effective than letters. If you call a representative's office, you will most likely be speaking with an aide or an intern. This doesn't matter though, as elected officials keep extensive records about who calls their office and why. If enough people call about an issue, it will gain the notice of the politician. Keep your phone call short; explain exactly what it is you're concerned about and what you hope the politician will do. Ask your representative's staff to respond to your request and to update you on the outcome of the issue.

Sample phone script:

Hello, my name is _____. I am a constituent in _____ *[the name of the representative's district]* and I'm calling today to urge Senator _____ to support _____ *[the name and the number of the proposed bill]*. This bill will increase voter turnout among both young people and their parents and will make politicians more responsive to the needs of young people. *[Name up to three positive effects of the bill, no more than a sentence or two on each.]* I am also requesting support for this bill because, as a high school teacher, I am aware that my students possess the critical thinking skills and interest to participate in local elections that affect their daily lives. *[You should also add a message about how the bill will affect you personally, if you can]*. Thank you for sharing my message and I would like a reply on how the Senator will be voting on this issue. *[Make sure to give your contact details.]*

Writing Letters and Emails

If you are nervous about talking on the phone, you can still write a letter. Here are some tips:

- Keep it formal and under a page. Letters should be printed, not handwritten.
- Personalize your letter - don't write the same letter to everyone.
- Include the following:
 - Your name and address and that you are a member of NYRA (and any other relevant organizations)
 - How the issue affects you personally
 - Nonpartisan evidence to support your argument
 - Acknowledgement of their efforts on similar issues (if applicable)
 - A direct request for action. Include the name and number of the bill, if applicable request for a reply

You can also [use our template for writing letters here](#).

While typed letters are more likely to be noticed, an email is better than nothing. The same rules apply and make sure to include your mailing address.

In-person Meetings

Meeting your representatives or local officials in person is a good way to show that you're passionate about an issue and that you have the skills to build a campaign around it. The following tips will help you present your case, either in a personal meeting or in front of your city council.

Before Your Meeting

- **Schedule an Appointment.** You can usually do this by calling your representative's office and asking when they are available to meet with a constituent. Some representatives also have an online form to request a meeting on their webpage, usually under "Contact." Be prepared to wait weeks or even month for the meeting to happen. If they don't respond within several weeks, don't be afraid to follow up.
- **Know Who You're Meeting.** Get to know the politician you're contacting, including their voting history, what committees they serve on, and how they feel on similar issues. Think about ways to tie your issue to something that they already care about. In some cases, especially at the federal level, you may only be meeting with staff members, but it is generally the staffers who write laws, propose ideas, and advise the elected official, so treat them in the same manner.
- **Invite Others to Attend.** Not everyone you ask has to be a member of your chapter, but they should support the issue you want to discuss. In fact, encouraging people from other types of groups who have the same position as you, even if for different reasons, can show that your issue has a wide base of support. Limit the number of people to 5 and meet with each other beforehand to make sure everyone in your group knows what they are going to say and that people aren't repeating each other.
- **Dress Professionally.** Wear clothes you'd use for an interview.

What to Bring

You should always prepare material stating the main points relevant to your issue and bring extra copies to give to any staff. Ideally, it shouldn't be more than 1-2 pages.

Things to include:

- **Who you are:** Make sure they know you are from the National Youth Rights Association and provide your contact details so that they can get in contact with you or follow up at our national office for more information on the issue. If you are representing other groups, mention them as well.
- **What you want:** Are you asking them to draft or co-sponsor a bill?

- **Previous legislation:** Did someone try to pass a law in favor of this issue? Try to find previous examples of similar legislation. If your examples include legislation from your area or state and from the same political party as your representative, great, but anything similar is fine.
- **Talking points:** What are the main points that support your issue? Put them in a concise list. Use nonpartisan evidence and statistics where appropriate to support your claims. Mention politicians that support your issue. Cite your sources.
- **A draft of the new legislation:** If you are asking your representative to write an entirely new piece of legislation, provide them with a draft. If you'd like us to help you write one, let us know.
- **Details of the current bill:** If there is a bill already introduced, note the bill, its name and number, and state its current status (including how many people are currently cosponsoring it).

What to Say

- **Build a relationship.** What your representatives think of you can determine how seriously they take your suggestions and concerns. Be polite, even when you disagree. Express appreciation for any work they have done on pro-youth or similar issues and thank them for meeting with you. Even if they don't support your issue now, they may in the future.
- **Ask them to take some action.** State exactly what you want your representative to do, such as author or co-sponsor a bill.
- **Explain why this issue is important to you and your community.** Talk about how it affects your daily life and why you are campaigning about it. Make it clear that you are also representing a need in your district and explain how your issue will help address that need. Tell them about the community outreach you've done and the support you have.
- **Address their concerns.** Listen to what they care about and try to give honest answers to any questions they have. Acknowledge the downsides to a bill if it comes up, but state how you think the pros outweigh the cons. Politicians need to explain to their constituents why they are supporting an issue and you should help them find suitable answers to the difficult questions posed by people who oppose your issue. Get back to them if you don't know the answer.
- **Try to reach some middle ground.** If your representative isn't supportive, ask what is holding them back. Do they need more information or are they looking to hear from more constituents? Ask them what they are willing to do in order to address the issue. Ask them how you can make what you want a reality.

After Your Visit

- **Send a Thank You note.** Send a thank you email to any representatives or staff who were present at the meeting. Restate your request for action and include any relevant information, such as a link to the bill discussed or a PDF of your materials or draft legislation.
- **Report back to your community.** Share the outcome of your meeting with us at NYRA and with your community. Any support will help to increase awareness of your issue. You can write an op-ed for your local newspaper, contact the media if you haven't already done so, conduct a letter-writing campaign, and post on social media.
- **Follow up.** If your elected official makes a promise, it is a good idea to check up on them in a couple of months. If they've done what you've asked, send another thank you note. If they haven't, feel free to send them a friendly reminder.

Speaking at City Council Meetings

Many state legislatures and nearly every city council allow members of the public to speak at hearings on legislation. In addition to the above, you should:

- **Find out where and when the council meetings are.** This is usually on your city's website.
- **Practice your speech.** Typically, speakers are allowed two minutes to address the council. Practice with a timer to ensure you make the most of your time.
- **Come early and fill out a speaker card, if required.**
- **Remember to introduce yourself and where you live before you speak.**
- **Be flexible.** Even though you will have prepared a speech, there might be other people speaking on the same issue. If you can address their concerns or build on what they've said, feel free to do so.
- **Follow up.** You can send any relevant written materials to the council after the meeting.

HOW TO USE THE MEDIA TO PROMOTE YOUTH RIGHTS

Media coverage is extremely important for promoting your issue or campaign. Interviews, news articles, and press releases are all crucial components to be aware of within your local chapter. Media coverage is extremely important for promoting your issue or campaign.

- **Media coverage spreads your message.** Most people have never heard of youth rights, or are unsure what it means. Part of our work, and the work of our chapters, is to make sure that the public understands the reasons we advocate for young people. Involving the media not only informs your local community about your campaign, but allows your message to reach a wide range of people who may have never heard of youth rights.
- **Media coverage garners support.** Making headlines in a positive way will bring members right to your front doorstep. If the media never covered a single story on us, then we would never have the level of support that we do now. Continually making positive headlines and spreading our message means that we have the potential to gain many new supporters. In addition to letting other know about your campaign and youth right in general, media coverage, if maneuvered correctly, can help to paint you in a positive light. Presenting your chapter as a passionate and knowledgeable one will put a human face to your cause. This will encourage people to identify with you and help gain support.
- **Media coverage exhibits authority.** Through continuous presence in the media, your chapter can demonstrate authority in the community. Your chapter will begin to be taken seriously in the eyes of not only other news outlets, providing further media coverage, but also in the eyes of supporters and critics across the nation.

Making your story appealing to the media

- **Is it newsworthy?** Not everything that your chapter does will be newsworthy. Media outlets will not report on an organizational chapter meeting. Outlets will, however, cover events that you and your chapter create, protests and rallies you organize, and press releases you distribute. At the end of the day, media outlets mainly care about news. Make sure that your chapter participates in newsworthy activities from time to time.
- **If there is conflict, what is the impact it has on society?** Stories that deal with a conflict of some sort, and the impact it has on society, are especially intriguing to media outlets. In order to bring about a change on the views of youth, conflicts with other organizations will come up. The impact that is placed on society because of these conflicts are sure to grab the media's eye. Keep it in the back of your head while dealing with the media the conflict and impact of the story at hand.
- **Is your story keeping up with the time?** People do not read CNN or The New York Times for dated news. In order to keep people informed about what is going on around the country and the world, media outlets tend to cover stories that

keep with the times. Rarely will a media outlet cover a story that is a month old. Make sure that your chapter stays active and continues to make progress to ensure the attention of media outlets is brought to your doorstep.

Contacting the media

In order for any type of release to have an impact, you must contact the right people. Over time, your organization will find media outlets that consistently show interest in your event and progress. Building lasting relationships with these outlets, and the specific people within them that cover your chapter, is the key to positive media.

- **Identify which news outlets to distribute to.** Knowing and being aware of your audience will make media distributions much more effective. Do they do televised newscasts, write articles on a website, or run a blog? This will help determine the tone and style you should take while considering who to contact. Make sure that all the intended outlets **line up with your organization**. For example, your chapter should not plan to distribute any releases to tech companies or blogs about cooking. Release information with the intention of distributing it to a major or local news station, or another appropriate outlet.
- **Use a tone that matches the media outlet.** If your intended outlets are mainly televised, then **plan the outreach in a conversational tone so that it can be easily read by the newscaster**. The outreach needs to both flow and be concise in order for the outlet to easily quote it. If the intended outlets are mainly **newspapers or blogs**, then you can contact them in a much more factual, straightforward tone and style.
- **Initial contact with a newsroom is simple.** Once you have your release or advisory ready, you can send it to the newsroom via an email or a fax. Most contact information can be found on their official website. After doing so, make sure you follow up with someone in the company to make sure they have received and read it. This is vital to maintaining and building a relationship with the media. Keep in mind that newsrooms receive many stories and releases in a single day. Following up can make or break your story making it to a headline.
- **Who should you contact?** The key to getting the media work for you is building relationships and networking with the media. Over time, your chapter will get to know reporters. Make sure to obtain their information and keep in touch; this will make getting them to write a story about your release or advisory much easier. Once you have their personal information and a solid relationship built up, you can email or call them directly once you have a release ready to distribute. Even when you don't have release ready, reporters are a great contact to utilize when in need of advice, or to even just talk about business with. Reporters that you

have cultivated strong relationships will be sure to cover your material once it is ready, so be sure to keep them in mind! Finally, it is always smart to keep a running list of all your contacts. Never let a potential outlet slip through your fingertips.

Press Releases

A press release is a concise document that can be written by your chapter or group to inform other on news or on a campaign you are working on. Often they are written by public relations professionals, but you can feel comfortable writing them as well. When written and implemented well, press releases can attract a lot of positive media coverage, resulting in free positive advertising for your chapter. Through some simple changes, press releases can be formed into media advisories. These are simply invitations to the media regarding upcoming events you might be holding. Use these suggestions to help you write an effective press release or advisory:

- **Write the release as if you were the reporter.** The idea of a press release is too make the job easy for members of the media. Journalists use an “inverted pyramid” style, where the most important information will be featured at the beginning of the release, and the least important information will be featured at the end of the release:
 - Attention-grabbing headline that tells the story (don’t use clickbait)
 - Opening paragraph answering who, what, why, when, where and how. It should contain all of the absolutely necessary information. The audience should be able to get the gist of the release in the first few sentences.
 - Mid-section containing additional information that is helpful, but not necessary. Contains quotes.
 - Final section has the least important information.
 - Keep the press release short and concise. Do not lengthen it by adding unnecessary information and details. Extra information raises more questions than it answers, and runs the risk of losing the interest of reporters. Press releases are usually around 300-400 words. Don’t add filler information.
- **Locate effective quotes and statements from officials within your organization and try to find an emotional angle.** This intrigues news outlets and keeps them interested.
- **Include quotes and emotionally evocative statements.** This grabs the audience’s attention and keeps them interested. This provides a “Human-interest” angle.

- **Write the press releases in a positive light** – regardless of whether or not it being written to defend the company in the midst of crisis or to attract the press.
- **Make sure the press release is thoroughly edited** by a set of fresh eyes, just as any piece of writing needs to be.
- **Contact your intended outlets directly**, through e-mail or fax. If you or your organization has any personal, direct contacts to any of your intended outlets, contact them directly to ensure the release is read by an actual media contact.

Media Interviews

From time to time, a simple article on a recent press release may not be enough for a reporter to cover. If they need more material, they may reach out to you or someone within your chapter to schedule an interview. Many begin to shake at the mere mention of an interview, but there are steps to take to ensure everything goes smooth.

- **The basics.** When the reporter initially calls to schedule an interview, do not freak out. If you are busy in that specific moment and cannot schedule an interview immediately, the first question you should ask is if they are on a deadline. If they are, they will quickly lose interest in the story altogether if you cannot meet in a timely manner. You, and anyone else involved in the interview, should also make sure that they are comfortable with all of the information being covered. The goal is to be able to bring as few notes as possible, and keep the information in your head. A conversational tone and open dialogue is key in an interview. No one enjoys a robotic-sounding interview. Let the reporter suggest a location to hold the interview. They called you, so be sure to give them the common courtesy of choosing the location. When you do finalize a location, make it a point to be on time. This may sound like common sense, but it can look very unprofessional if you are late.
- **The interview.** Public speaking, interviewing, and even just talking with someone new can give a lot of people anxiety. In an interview, try your best to relax and focus on the information. Think of them as just conversations between you and the reporter. Avoid saying “um”, or “so, yeah.” to end thoughts. Not only does this sound unprofessional, but it leads the interviewer to believe you don’t really know what you’re talking about. Keep in mind that you already have a message you are trying to send to the public. If and when necessary, manipulate the reporter’s question to turn it back around to this message. This means that if the interviewer asks a question that you don’t necessarily like, or find useful to your message, then turn it around and answer it in a manner that communicates your desired message.

- **Other considerations.** Regardless of whether or not the interview is being video recorded or not, be sure to dress in professional attire. This sends the message that you are serious about the interview to both the audience and the reporter. Be sure to clarify everything you say. Don't be vague in answering your questions, because the answer you give can be easily manipulated by the media. The thought of clarity can even be as simple as making sure you introduce yourself properly. Be sure to state any relevant information, such as your name, age, organization, school, or anything else that may be relevant in the interview. Keep in mind that not only press releases and media advisories will attract the attention of the media. If you organize a protest or a rally, they will most likely come to you regardless. Be prepared for this, and if and when that time comes, be ready to elect a spokesperson.

Using Social Media

Many people today do not get their news by reading the newspaper or watching the evening news. For the most part, people see online articles shared on websites such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr, or other social media sites. Many people, especially young people, are very connected and spend a lot of time using technology in their daily lives. Utilizing social media campaigning has the potential to garner support with our target demographic.

- **What should you be sharing on social media?** If your chapter has social media pages, which it should, there are a number of different topics you could be talking about on your page. Any newsworthy topic should be posted to the page, whether that be an article an outlet has written about your chapter, or some advancements that were made behind the scenes. One of the strengths that social media has behind it is the ease of starting a discussion. Posting questions, polls, or simple statements that can spark a discussion in the replies or comments is a great way to spread our message. Statistics and recent reports always make for great content to share. After all, the facts don't lie! Finally, keep in mind that social media is essentially free advertising. One viral post has the power to go to international headlines in minutes. Be aware of everything you post.
- **What should you not be sharing on social media?** Avoid getting too involved in the comments section after you post. The goal is to start a discussion, not an argument. Before posting an article or an external source, make sure the source is reliable and not clickbait. Misleading potential readers is not good for garnering support. This may sound like common sense, but also avoid sharing any

information that distracts from our message. Focus on what is important, and the topic at hand.

HOW TO ORGANIZE A PROTEST, WALKOUT OR BOYCOTT

Protests are a good way to raise awareness and demonstrate support for an issue. They can also help people feel they are part of a bigger movement and inspire them to action. The goal of protesting isn't just to yell and hold up signs, it's to inspire change and influence your community. However, protests can be controversial, so you should think about the pros and cons in your particular situation.

Types of Protests

When people think of protesting, they often picture a large march, but there's lots of different ways to get your point across.

- **Sit-ins** involve peacefully occupying a public space by sitting for a designated period of time and are popular in schools and colleges. Sit-ins for student rights have taken place [outside the offices of college presidents](#) and [in high school courtyards](#). A sit-in demanding academic freedom could entail students sitting in on a class they're not allowed to take, sitting outside a principal's office, or occupying a school board meeting.
- **Silent protests** can be done as part of refusing to participate in a required activity. You can organize your protest on a specific day and include symbols of solidarity such as wearing a specific color. In 2010, [2,086 students at West High in Madison, Wisconsin gathered for a silent sit-in](#) to protest a change in their curriculum.
- **Walkouts** are often used in schools and colleges where a group simply leaves at a designated time in an effort to express disapproval. They can often lead into a rally or march. They also can occur spontaneously, in response to some event. Walkouts have a long history in the fight for student rights, including [Barbara Johns who organized a walkout to protest poor school facilities and segregated schools in the 1950s](#) and Mexican-American students that protested [unfair treatments and corporal punishment](#) in the 60s.
- **Protest rallies** involve people making speeches about an issue. You can invite someone to act as an emcee to lead protest chants and songs and other community members who support your issue. Rallies are often used at the

beginning or end of protest marches, but can be used by themselves. Rallies should be creative to bring attention to your cause. In 2014, dozens of students from the [Providence Student Union](#) in Providence, RI [dressed up as zombies for a rally against standardized testing](#).

- **Picketing and protest marches** are similar except a picket stays in one place, like in front of a business, and marches go from one location to another. In most places, you will have to remain on the sidewalk or other public areas unless you've obtained a permit from your local government.
- **Boycotts** are refusals to buy a product or participate in an activity. Boycotts can happen alongside a protest and are good to use as a last resort- just the threat of a boycott may be enough to make your opposition back down.

Planning Your Protest

- **Use your protest as part of a larger campaign.** Depending on what your issue is, you should make sure that you've also used other methods to create change. If you are protesting a law or policy, let the people responsible know your complaint and give them a chance to respond. And since not everyone will be comfortable with protesting, make sure you are being inclusive by encouraging other ways for people to show their support, such as making phone calls, writing letters, or organizing a boycott. Holding a protest where not enough people show up might not help your campaign as much as other tactics, so you should make sure you have enough people to participate.
- **Decide on a time and place.** Protests can happen anywhere, but you should arrange your protest where it will be seen by as many people as possible. Some options include the sidewalk in front of a business, government offices, your school, or a park. If you're protesting on private property without permission, the owner can ask you to leave and call the police to remove you if you don't. You should also pick a time when you can get the most people to attend the protest (like a weekend), unless you want to specifically target someone (such as a legislator) and pick a time when they'll be around. Obtain a permit, if needed.
- **Publicize your protest.** Make brightly-colored flyers and posters about the protest and put them up around town and your school. Hand out pamphlets. Publicize in your school newspaper and on social media. Make a press release and send it to local newspapers, to websites and blogs, and to other organizations that may support your message. Call local newspapers and radio stations and ask them to promote the protest. Be prepared to talk about your issue in case you are asked for an interview. Even if people don't come, they may be curious and research it.

- **Make a visual impact.** Make brightly colored posters and banners with catchy slogans and bring some extra. Have pamphlets to help spread your message information on what you're protesting to interested parties. Put the name of your chapter or group with your contact details so that people who are new to the issue will know who to contact to find out more. You can use chalk to write messages on public sidewalks.
- **Be vocal.** Learn or create some chants so that everyone knows what you're protesting and why. Some examples include:
 - What do we want? Voting Rights! When do we want them? Now!
 - Hey, hey! Ho, ho! Curfew laws have got to go!
 - Youth rights are human rights!
 - Whose schools? Our schools!
- **Document your event and have fun.** Even if you are protesting something serious, you can make your protest entertaining. Take pictures and post them on social media. Live stream or record your protest. Keep the people energized and having fun.

Boycotts

Boycotts are similar to non-compliance strategies in that they are refusals engage participate in a certain activity. One common example which has been used by thousands of students nationwide is opting out of standardized testing. Students in Colorado have [organized statewide campaigns](#) and staged walkouts during the state-mandated tests. The [Providence Student Union](#) successfully petitioned the Rhode Island legislature to pass a three-year moratorium on using high-stakes testing as a graduation requirement through organizing rallies and conducting sit-ins at school board meetings.

Students, along with parents and teachers, [have continued their boycotts against standardized tests](#) even in the face of very clear consequences. States and school systems have threatened to fire teachers, fine parents, and suspend students for not taking standardized tests, and have begun doing so. But the the activists in the opt-out movement realize that the real power lies with the students – so the movement is not only holding together, it's growing.

Youth rights activists have also organized boycotts and protests against convenience stores that have refused to allow more than one student in the store at a time as another successful example.

Know your rights

Sometimes protests are unpredictable, but you should have a plan for how to deal with the police if they show up. Have proof of your permit, if you have one. Make sure you [know your rights as a protester](#) and are familiar with how to deal with police in case you get stopped by an officer.

Missing Classes

If your protest involves missing class, you may be punished for having an unexcused absence. However, that punishment should not be any worse than if you missed class for another reason.

Make sure you've checked your school's policies on the punishments for unauthorized absences as well as their guidelines for suspensions. If you are being threatened with a punishment that is more extreme, it is possible that your school is reacting to the particular stance that you are taking, and that could be a violation of your freedom of speech. In many cases, students who walkout in large numbers can be spared punishment since the administration would not practically suspend everyone, but this really depends on your school and the issue. In these cases, schools may just choose to punish the organizers.

Disrupting Classes

Schools could also punish you for disrupting other students' right to an education. Legally, disruption is difficult to determine, but it can include interrupting classes, threatening or harassing others, violent behavior, preventing school events for taking place, or causing emotional distress. Sometimes even the behavior of others, such as a flood of calls from angry parents to the school, can be considered a disruption. However, if you are just walking out, the "disruption" caused may not be substantial enough to warrant any punishment.

Unfortunately, the Supreme Court has ruled on multiple occasions that students' First Amendment rights do not apply when students are found guilty of disruption. Those rulings usually focus on the fact that classes and class schedules are disrupted and the students who remain in school are distracted during walkouts. Furthermore, federal courts have determined that "the First Amendment does not require school officials to wait until disruption actually occurs before they may act" ([Karp v. Becken, Ninth Circuit, 1971](#)). In another federal court case, ([Dodd v. Rambis, Southern District Court of Indiana, 1981](#)), the court ruled that students' distribution of leaflets urging fellow students to engage in another student walkout was substantially disruptive to school

activities. In that case, a judge explained: “The First Amendment does not require school officials to forestall action until disruption of the educational system actually occurs. Indeed, this is the very essence of the forecast rule.”

While the administration can punish you for disruption, they cannot prevent you from having a walkout, say by issuing a school lockdown, for example, without a legitimate safety concern.

HOW TO CHANGE SCHOOL POLICY

One of the trickiest things about creating change in schools is that it isn't always clear who sets school policy. Policies can be determined at the federal or state level, either through legislation, legal cases, or guidelines set by the federal or state Departments of Education. Other policies are also set at the local level either through the school board or by the superintendent. And of course policies are implemented differently by teachers and school administrators. Student handbooks are a good place to find out your school's policies and can also outline who is responsible for implementing those policies. Once you've figured out who the decision maker is for your particular issue, you can start letting them know your concerns.

During your negotiations with school administrators or board members, find out what they care about and what would make them support your goal. For example:

- Does your principal care more about whether policies are easy for the teachers to implement or what parents will say?
- Is your school board member up for re-election and are they concerned about getting the youth vote? Or maybe they feel secure in their seat and are willing to take on less popular legislation?
- Is the school policy you are fighting was implemented by an unpopular administration and can you use that to increase your support among teachers and parents?

Meeting with the Administration

If possible, it is a good idea to meet with your teacher or principal first to see if you can negotiate a change in policy. This can work well if it is something small or if a policy is being implemented unfairly. Here are some tips for your meeting:

- Present your information in writing.
- Outline the educational benefits of your new policy.
- Be courteous and professional, and expect that behavior to be returned.

If your complaint involves the principal, you can also make formal complaints to the superintendent or go directly to the school board.

Meeting with the School Board

Most school districts are run by local school boards (sometimes called a Board of Education). Depending on the [state or district](#), school board members can be either elected or appointed by a governmental official. The responsibilities of school boards can vary, but typically may include hiring and firing the superintendent, approving the school calendar, setting the curriculum, setting the school budget, negotiating with the teachers' union, and overseeing issues with school facilities, including the construction of new schools.

There are many different ways students have used school boards as part of their campaign. For example:

- **Speak at a school board meeting.** Most school board meetings schedule a set time for public commentary where you can ask the board to take action on an issue. You should check if there are procedures in place to sign up for a speaking time or if you can simply show up unannounced. Here are some further [guidelines on how to testify at a school board](#).
- **Run for school board.** Eligibility to join and vote on a school board varies by state. There is currently 19 states that include students in their state board of education and 25 states allow [students on their district school boards](#). Students who serve on their school boards are not elected in the same way that its adult members are. In most cases they are selected separately by the school board. However, these student representatives may also be elected by their fellow students to represent them on the district school board. Here is a list of laws that either [students to participate in school boards or prevent their participation](#) at the state and district level.
- **Expand the power of students on the school board.** Even school boards that allow student members sometimes only give them limited power. If this is the case in your district, you can follow other students that have [expanded the power of students on school boards](#) in their area.
- **Use political pressure.** Even if you can't vote or run for school board you can run a campaign that tell parents and other community members to vote for school board members who want to protect student rights.
- **Use direct action.** Some students have also taken over school board in protest. Here's an example of students who protested changes in their curriculum. You can also [learn more about student protests in our Activist Toolkit](#).

- **File a complaint against the school board or your school.** Your school board may have a formal procedure for filing a complaint. (For example, the California Department of Education created this [Uniform Complaint Procedure Form](#) which you can submit online.) You may also be able to get a form by asking your principal or school administrator. If you go through a formal complaint procedure, the school district will be required to give you a response within a certain amount of time explaining what they found, their conclusions and the legal basis for it, what steps they plan to take, and your right to appeal. Every state department of education has its own process of receiving complaints against teachers and administrators. You can find this on the state DOE's website. Your complaint will carry weight if you convince other classmates to submit complaints as well.

Using Student Government

The amount of power that student governments (sometimes called student councils or student unions) have to change policy can vary greatly depending on the school, but unfortunately it is often limited. However, that doesn't mean that they can't be a useful tool in getting students more involved in policy making. Many student governments, especially in colleges, [have made important changes](#) that affect students' everyday lives. These include establishing [all gender restrooms](#) and [providing free hygiene products to students](#).

Some students have formed campus political parties in order to turn student governments into a force for change. In the 1960s, innovative UC Berkeley political party [SLATE](#) won many student government seats, inspiring other parties across the country and starting a [historical movement for free speech](#).

Some schools will also take the student council more seriously than just a group of students. And at the college level, some student governments can send representatives to be a voting member of the governing board of their institution.

Using Direct Action in Schools

If your requests are ignored or denied by school officials, you can [use direct action](#) to apply more pressure and show that the students are the ones with the power. For example, if meeting with and petitioning your administration isn't working, you can apply more pressure by including theatrical actions and walkouts.. Before engaging in direct action it is a good idea to put your requests in writings and try to get any reply in writing, so that you have a record of your attempt and your the decision maker's refusal.

[Involving the media](#) can help put more pressure on the school administration and may even make them look unreasonable.

It can also be a good idea to change your tactics so that the administration will have to spend time thinking about how to respond. For example, if students at your school have led walkouts before and been ignored by the principal, you can try a sit-in in the principal's office instead.

Groups will often choose more direct tactics in order to make the cost of not granting their demands greater in terms of public relations, money, staff time, headaches, etc. than the cost of refusing them. Using direct tactics is often about forcing the decision maker to consciously weigh the cost of not addressing your demands. Because of this you should keep in mind to only use strategies you're comfortable with. You will only gain traction succeed if everyone in your chapter is fully behind your strategies and tactics, so if you're not comfortable using certain tactics you should choose a different overall strategy so you don't have to.

Defending against School Punishment

Many students who have worked on changing school policy have focused on changing how school punishment is implemented. Regardless of whether you abide by all of your school's rules, any student can be brought in for questioning and you should be prepared. This is especially true if you are accused of breaking a law, since anything you say to a teacher or administrator can be used as evidence in a court case.

Set up a Student Defense Committee

A Student Defense Committee (SDC) is a group of students that offers assistance to other students accused of breaking a school rule and are involved in disciplinary procedure with the school administration. The SDC provides those students with support and acts in a similar role to that of a defense lawyer. The aim of a Student Defense Committees is to ensure that the student's rights of due process are protected throughout the procedure.

The SDC assigns a member of its committee to assist any student that requests it. That member can accompany the student during both informal hearings, such as getting called into the school office, and during formal hearings which can include appealing decisions at various levels of school administration. The SDC also serve to educate students about their rights in general.

Student Defense Committees are usually set up within the student council, but can be independent bodies. Students wishing to set up a SDC will need to find other students who would want to join and be able to explain the importance of having representation during a disciplinary procedure to both the other students and the administration.

Record Conversations and Take Notes

If you are questioned about possible rule-breaking, and can't have another student in the meeting to help you, it is a good idea to try to record your conversation or take notes. You should let teachers and administrators know you are recording them as this alone will make them more likely to be careful in what they say. If they ask you not to record the conversation, you should ask them why, but be aware that in [many states](#) you are only allowed to record conversations when both parties agree. If you aren't able to take notes, write down everything after the meeting. You can also let the administrators know that you will be appealing their decision or contacting the media if you feel you have been treated unjustly.

HOW TO DO OUTREACH IN YOUR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

Reaching out to members of your community is an important part of promoting your campaign and building your chapter. Outreach activities are used to:

- Inform people about your campaign and youth rights in general
- Find out what issues people care about in your community
- Motivate people to get involved
- Find new members for your chapter
- Build coalitions with other advocacy groups

Publicize and Document Everything!

Before you plan a specific outreach activity, there are two things to keep in mind. You'll want to promote your event so that people know about it. And you'll also want to report on it so that people more people come to the next one. This means taking pictures and writing a little bit about why this issue is important and what your chapter is working on. Post your photos on your chapter's social media pages and share it with your community. Also be sure to send your pictures to your Chapter Coordinator so we can share it on NYRA's social media. And check out our media toolkit for [how to use social and traditional media](#) to promote your campaign.

Using school resources

School projects and assignments

Any time you have some choice about a school assignment, especially if you are working in a group or giving a presentation, you can use it to share your point of view with your teacher and fellow classmates and encourage them to join your campaign. Explaining youth oppression in a class presentation can also help you [form a chapter](#) or [ignite a protest](#).

Writing for your school newspaper

School newspapers are a great way to reach your entire student body and you can write on a variety of topics, including updates on your chapter and the location of your meetings. Of course, you'll have to answer to whoever edits the paper, but students in public schools have certain [free speech rights](#) and may be able to fight censorship even when the school publishes the paper.

Underground papers and zines

You can also choose to self-publish your own underground paper or “zines,” which are small, hand-crafted publications often used in resistance movements. There you'll have more freedom to write about your ideas. These can also be distributed throughout local communities more easily than online publications, and will feel more personal to anyone who reads them.

Posters and Fliers

Design posters and flyers that have catchy headlines such as “Tired of having too much homework?” or “Want more say in your education?” Hang posters on the walls and hold them up at school events. Hand out fliers and place them in lockers, on car windshields, or wherever your school allows.

Stay in Contact

Always have a sign-in sheet available at all of your chapter's activities including meetings, tabling events, and any protests or campus actions. You can also bring one to other organizations' meetings and events, but it is a good idea to ask permission or let people know. You can also ask your teachers if you can make a two minute

announcement about NYRA at the beginning of your classes and pass around a signup sheet.

Your sign-up sheet should collect people contact information and you can add them to an email list. Remember, everyone who comes to your table or your event is a potential new member and while some people won't want to join your chapter, you can still encourage them to sign up to receive email alerts and reminders about NYRA-related actions, meetings, and events on campus. It is important to follow up with each contact.

Hold Open Meetings

Even there's only a couple of people in your chapter, it's important to set up a time to meet and invite others to it. Some people will just come out of curiosity. Be inviting and don't be embarrassed to be looking for new people to join.

Organize a Special Event

Some people will be more comfortable attending a special event than a meeting. Here are some ways for people to learn about youth rights without feeling pressured to join your chapter (although you can always encourage people who seem interested and invite them to your next meeting.)

Event Ideas

- Screen a movie or documentary about youth rights or an intersecting issue
 - Documentaries about Youth Rights: The War on Kids, Kids for Cash, The Kids We Lose, Agents of Change
 - Some Pro-Youth Films: The Hate U Give, Dead Poets Society, The Trotsky, Home Alone, The Breakfast Club, Ferris Bueller's Day Off, We Are Little Zombies
 - Other inspiring activist films: Iron Jawed Angels, Malcolm X, Amazing Grace
- Host a guest speaker, such as an elected official introducing pro-youth legislation or another youth rights activist. We can help you find if there are suitable speakers leaders near you.
- Organize a panel discussion or debate on a youth rights issue, such as: "Should we abolish the voting age?" "Should we end compulsory school?" or "Should truancy laws be abolished?"
- Organize a [rally or demonstration](#)

- Host a social event at a local restaurant or cafe, like a musical performance with pro-youth songs
- Hold a chapter fundraising event like a bake sale or car wash
- Attend a leadership or lobbying training together with other youth leaders
- Give a Know Your Rights training or workshop on youth rights
- Organize a Letter Writing Party to help people write letters to ask their representatives to take action on legislation.
- Organize a session of phone-banking or canvassing. You may be able to connect with other groups that have a voter registration file, but if not, there are free voter files you can find online - they just usually aren't as accurate. You can find constituents who are likely to support your policy and contact them by [canvassing](#), [phonebanking](#), or [postcarding](#). If there is a pending ballot measure, you can also canvass around your neighborhood to encourage people to support the measure.
- Partner with other groups to organize large-scale events. These could range from simple rallies and marches to mass acts of civil disobedience and wide-spanning boycotts.

Tabling

Tabling is another great way to use other events to get the word out about your NYRA chapter. You can check out the tabling opportunities exist at local marches such as those for climate change, women's rights, gay rights, etc. and student events such as orientation and club fair. Hand materials to prospective members and collect contact information to add to your chapter roster. It also helps to make signs, banners, or flyers so you can effectively display the NYRA logo and messages connected with NYRA's mission.

Gather materials needed such as:

- Leaflets
- Banner
- Sign-up sheets

Let your Chapter Coordinator know if you need help getting these.

Setting up

- Make your table look neat by covering it with a tablecloth, having a banner, and well-organized reading materials.
- Wear a NYRA shirt if you have one.
- Stand up if you can, and be friendly and approachable.

- And never underestimate the attraction of free candy.

What to Say

- Think of a catchy question to ask that will grab their attention. This way, you can have a conversation about the issues before introducing them to NYRA.
- Tell them about your chapter and what you do on campus and ask if they'd like to join your email list.
- Make sure you don't do all the talking. Make each interaction a conversation by asking questions. For example, after you have introduced NYRA you can ask "which youth rights issues are important to you?" If they say something relevant to what your chapter is working on, ask them if they would like to be involved in your efforts. If they something that your chapter isn't currently focused on, invite them to your next meeting to discuss their idea.

Connect with your community

- Attend events about intersecting issues and, if you ask a question, be sure to introduce yourself as a member of the National Youth Rights Association. Talk to the organizers and offer your chapter's help as co-presenters for future events.
- Socialize and make friends. Do your best to organize social events outside of your core NYRA chapter activities. By developing friendships with your members and facilitating friendships between them, you can make sure that members stay with your chapter and are motivated to follow through with delegated responsibilities. Nobody wants to let down their friends!
- Get feedback from your community. If you are undecided about which issue(s) to take on, a short opinion poll could be helpful in determining what level of support exists for various issues. Make a quick survey with five to 10 issues you are considering. (Here's a [sample survey](#) you can customize for your use.) You can also distribute the survey online using a service such as Survey Monkey, but conducting the survey in person allows you to talk to people face-to-face and answer any questions they might have.
- Get support from older people in your community. While your main focus will be to reach out to other young people, you should also try to connect with people who may support you such as teachers and parents.

APPENDIX

OUR MISSION

NYRA is dedicated to defending the freedom, equality, and rights of all young people by challenging age discrimination and prejudice.

NONDISCRIMINATION POLICY

NYRA does not and shall not discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, gender identity or expression, religion or creed, age, sexual orientation, national origin or ancestry, mental or physical ability, economic standing, or military status, in any of its activities or operations.