

# **STAND FOR YOUR MISSION**

**THE POWER OF BOARD ADVOCACY:  
A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR BOARDS**

**[WWW.STANDFORYOURMISSION.ORG](http://WWW.STANDFORYOURMISSION.ORG)**

# WE DO THIS WORK BECAUSE WE BELIEVE IN SOMETHING.

Whether it's ending homelessness or increasing access to opera, providing at-risk youth with the opportunity to receive a strong education, or protecting global human rights. Each of us is driven by a purpose. We do what we do because we believe that some things are important enough for us to take a stand.

Each of us has made a personal commitment to serve. We do it because it calls upon the best part of ourselves. The part that believes we must try. That believes that when we do try, we can make a difference.

**DECISIONS ARE HAPPENING  
AROUND US THAT AFFECT  
OUR ABILITY TO ACHIEVE  
OUR MISSIONS.**

We exist in a world of tough challenges. A world of budget and resource limitations. A world of differing opinions and conflicting priorities.

It is a fact of life that decisions get made every day that have a profound impact on our missions. Sometimes those decisions are based on ignorance, indifference, or bias. All too often, we are not at the

table. So we are forced to pick up the pieces after flawed decisions are made. Our work suffers. Our progress gets delayed. Our missions get compromised.

Our missions deserve better.

When we are at the table, we can ensure that our priorities are heard, that our communities are represented, that good ideas are funded, and that failing policies are questioned. We can help set the stage for real and lasting success for the people and issues we serve.

The fact is, our respective missions will never be fulfilled if we are relegated to accepting the decisions that are made without us. Our missions demand that we have an impact on those decisions before they are made. And to fix the ones that get in the way of our success.

**THERE IS ANOTHER WAY.**

There are more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States with an estimated 20 million board members at the helm. The sheer number of people who devote their lives, their money, and their time to an important mission is truly inspiring.

The most effective charitable organizations have recognized that successful advocacy does not require stepping into the quagmire of partisan politics. It simply means using our voices as committed and informed champions for our missions. Speaking the truth in a calm but unwavering voice. Reminding decision-makers of our shared values and beliefs. Sharing tested solutions to community problems. Helping community leaders understand the impact of their decisions.

But more than anything else, it requires standing for what we know to be true. It requires using our voices.

## YOU ARE THE VOICE YOUR MISSION NEEDS.

Each of us is deeply committed to our missions. Each of us has what it takes to be an advocate for our missions. As stewards of our organizations, we must find our voice.

The most useful — and under-utilized — asset our organizations have to advance our missions are the business

leaders, community volunteers, philanthropists, and opinion leaders who are so passionate about what our missions seek to achieve that they have already put their time, resources, and reputations on the line.

Our board members. Us.

Board members are the citizen leaders from whom decision-makers need to hear. Board members serve as powerful champions for our missions. We are the ambassadors who can bridge differences in opinion, turn ideas into solutions, and make good things happen.

Strong board leadership is not just about checks and balances; it is about creating the circumstances that will allow our missions to be achieved. That ensures progress can be made. That enables each of us to translate our shared beliefs into action.

Our missions will be fully realized when our community leaders hear our voices, understand our arguments, and see our causes as worthy of their best efforts. When we stand for what we believe in and insist on the best for our missions and those we serve.

# STAND FOR YOUR MISSION. YOUR MISSION. YOUR VOICE.

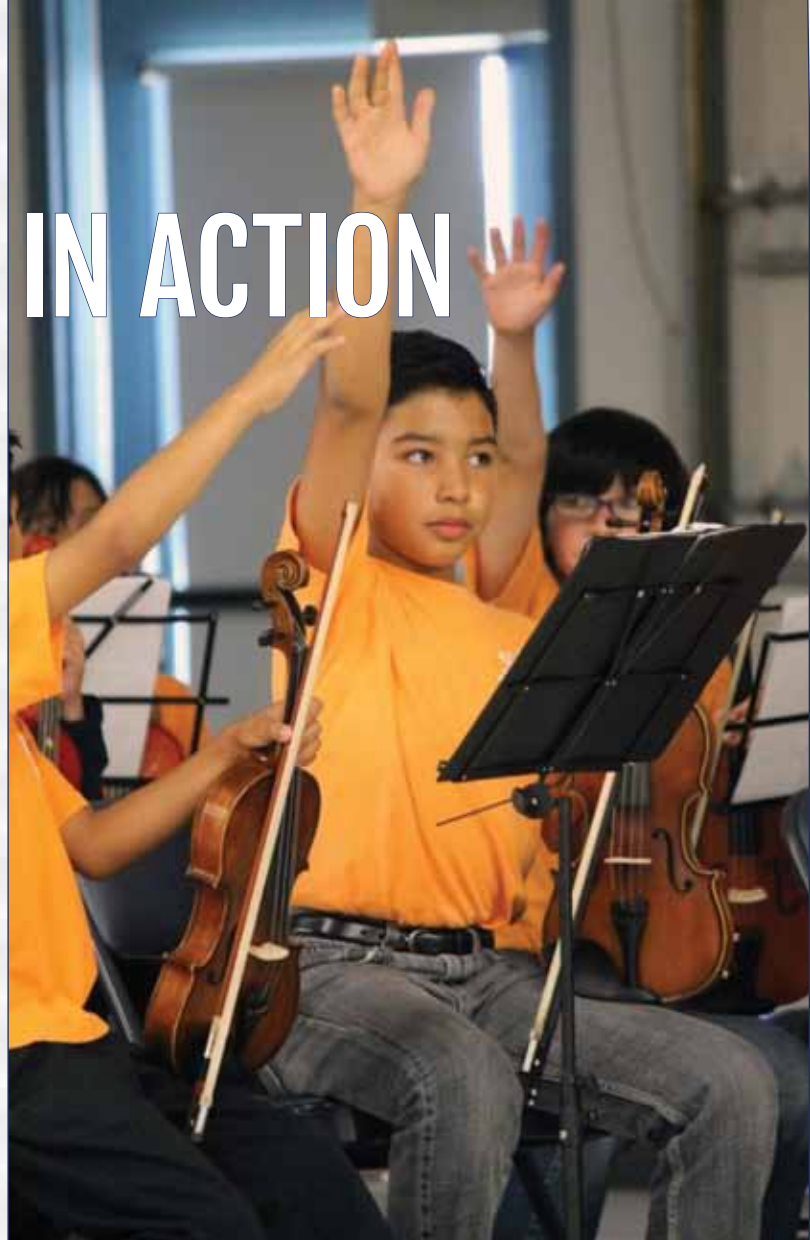


# BOARD ADVOCACY IN ACTION

## THE SAN DIEGO YOUTH SYMPHONY: A BOARD-DRIVEN STRATEGY TO GET MUSIC EDUCATION BACK INTO SCHOOLS

**THE VISION** The San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory's board advocacy work began with a reexamination of the organization's mission statement in late 2006 as it sought to grapple with board member disagreement. Some members believed SDYS should focus on pursuing musical excellence, while others wanted to increase access to music education. The writing of a new mission statement initiated a process of reflection and dialogue that culminated in an understanding that the two objectives were not mutually exclusive but highly complementary.

Two years later, SDYS began the League of American Orchestra's "Institutional Vision Program." This three-year training and practical application of the Jim Collins "Good to Great" framework solidified the full board's commitment to a shared vision and belief in the importance of investing equally in excellence and access. The establishment of the vision to "Make Music Education Accessible and Affordable for All" was the culmination of the process to bring the board into full unity.



**THE OPPORTUNITY** The board realized a strong connection exists between SDYS and the state of music education in schools when it examined the demographics of the students enrolled in the organization's traditional youth symphony program. The majority of those students came from affluent communities where children have access to music education in elementary school. Children who did not have access to music education in elementary school were not participating in SDYS's programs. Understanding this fact led to the board's commitment to use its resources to influence the state of music education in San Diego County. Most of the county's public schools in low-income areas had stopped investing in music education during the school day.

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The SDYS board now speaks of its success in terms of the systemic change it is achieving with school districts in addition to the individual change it is achieving with the student musicians in its programs.

Dalouge Smith, president and CEO, San Diego Youth Symphony

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**THE STRATEGY** Once the board had settled on its vision, a strategy for achieving the vision became necessary. The board understood immediately that it was unrealistic for SDYS to build the capacity and infrastructure to provide music education to the hundreds of thousands of students in San Diego County not receiving it. Creating such an infrastructure could only be achieved if it duplicated the existing public school system capacity to deliver educational experiences to every child. Instead, the board decided the quickest path to fulfilling its vision was to convince the county's public school systems to provide in-school music and partner with them to make it happen.

The board started from the belief that school districts have the resources and capacity to deliver music education but don't make music a priority. SDYS set out to influence school districts to invest in music education by launching the Community Opus Project. The Opus Project piloted a free after-school instrumental music instruction program for third-graders in the Chula Vista Elementary School District so that both school administrators and parents could witness the value learning music delivers to children. In this way, the board saw advocacy as the overall purpose of SDYS's Community Opus Project.

Advocacy is now written into SDYS's strategic framework as one of five principal activities. In the framework, it is defined as "community action" because in addition to exerting advocacy influence itself, the board aims for SDYS to galvanize community stakeholders, other partners, and parents to serve as advocates for in-school music education. The community action work includes a robust

community relations campaign involving numerous performances by Opus students throughout the community to build awareness of the benefits of music education and rally supporters. Opus students have performed before the city council, school board, parent committees, and local service organizations. Opus parents, who were encouraged to engage in the Opus lessons and attend school board meetings, have become powerful advocates for in-school music. The SDYS board now speaks of its success in terms of the systemic change it is achieving with school districts in addition to the individual change it is achieving with the student musicians in its programs.

**THE RESULT** Within the first year of SDYS's Community Opus Project providing music instruction at no cost to third-graders in two schools within the Chula Vista School District, the positive effects of learning music were so apparent that the district asked SDYS to expand the program to serve more students and provided funding to help make the expansion possible. In the second year, the district asked for an expansion to in-school music, and, in the third year, it committed to returning the music education program that had been eliminated 15 years earlier to all schools. The district has already hired full-time music teachers for eight of its 45 campuses and plans to hire more each year until in-school music is available for all of its 29,000 students. SDYS continues to provide after-school instruction and support the restoration of in-school music for the district. SDYS now also works with several other school districts in the region to support and guide their efforts to return music to their schools.



# STARTING A CONVERSATION IN YOUR BOARDROOM.

Every nonprofit has its own unique history, culture, and mission, and, therefore, its own view regarding advocacy. But, no matter where you are on the continuum — doing no advocacy to doing a lot — the path toward greater impact through advocacy begins with an honest conversation in the boardroom — a conversation about your organization’s mission, goals, and, most importantly, its vision for the future.

The following guide is designed to help you start that conversation. While some organizations may be able to move ahead quickly because they have already grappled with the more fundamental questions presented here, others may want to spend more time on those questions before moving on. Regardless of where your organization starts, we encourage you to use this guide as a tool for facilitating ongoing board dialogue on your organization’s legal right to advocate and for helping you cultivate a culture of standing for your mission in all possible ways.

## STEP 1: A SHARED VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Your organization was founded to meet a specific need or purpose and, as a part of that, is likely to have a vision of what the world would look like if that mission was achieved. Ask your board to answer the following questions:

- Is the board in agreement about our organization’s vision for the future?
- How would the world be different if our mission was fully achieved?
- Are our current strategies the fastest or most direct path to achieving our vision? If not, what would be?

## STEP 2: A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR WORK

All organizations are impacted by the larger environment and ecosystem in which they operate. Understanding what that ecosystem looks like for your organization, and where you are situated within it, is a critical step for your board. Ask your board the following questions:

- What are the societal realities or problems that our work seeks to solve, alleviate, or otherwise address?
- What are the broader issues associated with our core work?
- Are our strategies actively addressing those issues? If not, what would change if they did?

## STEP 3: IDENTIFICATION OF THE OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Changes in your community, funding sources, and policy environment affect — either positively or negatively — your organization's ability to achieve its mission. Identifying and understanding the opportunities and threats affecting your organization is a key step in building an advocacy strategy and in ensuring that your board is well-positioned to help implement that strategy. Ask your board the following questions:

- What are some of the external factors that have positively or negatively impacted our work in the past? How well did we — as a board — anticipate them before they happened? Did we try to stop or soften the bad ones, or rally to support the good ones?
- Are there policy changes that would dramatically improve (or threaten) our ability to fulfill our mission and vision? If we could advance our mission more effectively by changing one law, public policy, or public attitude, what would that change be?
- Do we have candid conversations about the reliability of funding that we earn through government contracts or grants?
- Are we — as an organization — actively engaged in conversations with decision-makers about the policies or decisions that affect our work? If not, why not?

## STEP 4: BOARD ENGAGEMENT IN MAKING IT HAPPEN

Every board member brings a potent combination of passion and influence to his or her board service that — if leveraged — can powerfully accelerate your organization's advocacy strategy. Understanding your board's networks and spheres of influence can help you map the ways each board member can help. Ask your board the following questions:

- Do we regularly discuss the implications of public policies and funding to our mission?
- Do we have a public policy strategy for our organization, and — if so — is the board well-informed about how best to support it?
- Do we have board leaders who can speak to and connect with a broad cross-section of community needs and constituencies in support of our work?
- Have we provided training or guidance to board members about how to engage effectively in advocacy efforts that enables them to represent our mission and work with confidence?

## STEP 5: MAKING ADVOCACY A PART OF YOUR BOARD'S CULTURE

A true cultural change happens when advocacy becomes fully integrated into the way that your board thinks, makes decisions, and measures its own success. Ask your board the following questions:

- Do we have goals for our advocacy work that enable us to assess how well we are doing across all the links and connections that are vital to our success?
- Is a degree of advocacy a part of every board member's job description?
- Is our board recruitment strategy aligned with our public policy strategy, and the connections or influence that will ensure our success?
- Are we — as an organization — actively participating in coalitions and organizations that are helping to advance our advocacy strategy?

# ACTIONS FOR NONPROFIT LEADERS



IF YOU'RE A  
NONPROFIT CEO...

- 1. Just starting out:** Engage your board in a conversation about what public policy is and how decisions made by people outside your organization influence your mission, making it easier or harder to accomplish.
- 2. Building:** Educate your board members about key policy issues that positively or negatively influence your organization's work (or could), and tap them to help open doors and make the case to external decision-makers and opinion leaders.
- 3. Accelerating:** Identify gaps in your organization's advocacy network and engage the board in recruiting new board members to help bridge them.
- 4. Connecting:** Join groups that monitor policy matters that might support or threaten your nonprofit's mission. Stay up to date on state and federal policy issues affecting nonprofits and your mission on the [National Council of Nonprofits's website](#), and then engage when appropriate.



IF YOU'RE A NONPROFIT  
BOARD MEMBER...

- 1. Just starting out:** Talk with your board chair or CEO about how your board can get more engaged in advocating for your organization's mission.
- 2. Building:** Participate in a training session about how to become a stronger advocate for your work.
- 3. Accelerating:** Institutionalize your board's role in advocating for your mission by incorporating it into your board job description and expectations.
- 4. Connecting:** Join groups that monitor policy matters that might support or threaten your nonprofit's mission. Stay up to date on state and federal policy issues affecting nonprofits and your mission on the [National Council of Nonprofits's website](#), and then engage when appropriate.





## IF YOU'RE A FUNDER...

- 1. Just starting out:** Engage in an internal conversation about what public policy is and how decisions by policymakers and others make it easier or harder for your grantees to accomplish their missions. Many foundations are inadvertently discouraging nonprofits from engaging in vital advocacy efforts by using unnecessarily hyper-restrictive or ominous language in grant agreements. Review your proposal guidelines and grant agreements to make sure you aren't artificially restricting your grantees' constitutional rights to speak up to advance their missions. For guidance, check out [this resource](#) from the Alliance for Justice.
- 2. Building:** Consider providing more general operating support grants that provide the flexibility to rally resources quickly to engage in advocacy campaigns as needed.
- 3. Accelerating:** Engage grantees in conversations about how they are using advocacy as a tool for greater impact. The Alliance for Justice has [suggestions on how to begin that conversation with your grantees.](#)
- 4. Connecting:** Stay up to date on policy issues affecting [foundations](#) and [nonprofits](#) and engage when appropriate. The Forum of Regional Association of Grantmakers created [this list of questions to think through prior to reaching out to a policymaker.](#)

# ABOUT THE STAND FOR YOUR MISSION CAMPAIGN

The **STAND FOR YOUR MISSION** campaign calls on all nonprofit decision-makers to stand for the organizations they believe in by actively representing their missions and values, and creating public will for important policy changes. A collaborative effort initiated by the Alliance for Justice, BoardSource, the Campion Foundation, the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, the Knight Foundation, and the National Council of Nonprofits, the campaign seeks to unleash the full potential of nonprofits to advance their missions by engaging board leaders more directly in the advocacy work of their organizations.





# GET ENGAGED

The most important action you can take is to start a conversation in your boardroom about how advocacy can accelerate the impact of your mission, with this resource as your guide. If you are also inspired to engage with our national campaign, we encourage you to join us.

Here are some ways to connect with the **STAND FOR YOUR MISSION** campaign:



**SHARE** your story about how board engagement in advocacy strengthened your organization's impact by submitting a "success story."



**CONTRIBUTE** a "photo pledge" to share what you stand for on [www.standforyourmission.org](http://www.standforyourmission.org).



Join the conversation about why board engagement in advocacy matters by joining the **STAND FOR YOUR MISSION** [LinkedIn](#) group.

Access more resources and tools to support your board's engagement in advocacy at:

**[WWW.STANDFORYOURMISSION.ORG](http://WWW.STANDFORYOURMISSION.ORG)**





*Your Mission. Your Voice.*

**[WWW.STANDFORYOURMISSION.ORG](http://WWW.STANDFORYOURMISSION.ORG)**