



# The Parent Point

A MONTHLY BRIEF FOR WASHINGTON'S PRIVATE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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## Does it really matter?: Parent political action groups

In the day to day box of our own school, its natural (and right) to pay attention to immediate local concerns. Dwelling too long on how we might fit into a bigger picture rarely gets much thought. Sad, but true. The strongest trait of the uniqueness of private schools – our independence- is often the biggest obstacle preventing any action for change. However, in the world of Olympia – size does matter. While each of the 500 approved private schools in Washington has its own unique needs and issues, there are a number of common threads which, when woven together, form a unity of substance that can gain successful notice.

### Where to begin?

The Washington Federation of Independent Schools (WFIS) acts as an umbrella voice for private schools, students and families in the education policy arena. In the mid-90's, the WFIS Board of Directors set out to redefine its position with decision-makers by strengthening its ties to the local level. Two strategies were adopted. First, develop a more direct linkage to each school through a regional election process that placed acting school heads on the Board. Secondly, they issued a call for each member school to develop a parent political action group. This latter effort was intended to ready the parents of Washington's 83,000 private school students for advocacy and action. To date, many schools have devised some manner of getting timely information to parents and encourage them to contact legislators and others on behalf of particular issues.

### Two recent examples

Prior to 1999, private schools were unable to access full-scale, FBI-level background checks on employees. While public school districts were routinely screening current staff and new hires, the enacted legislation neglected to give private school sponsors that same latitude. Persistent pressure on legislators and the

governor from parents and advocates organized by WFIS and the state Catholic Conference resulted in passage of legislation to fix the problem. While the issue seemed to be an easy one to fix, in reality it took steady pressure, letters, testimony, and numerous phone calls to win the effort. Often, the perception of many office holders is that we (1) don't want any of these policies, (2) are constitutionally restricted from them, or – worse yet – (3) they don't even realize we exist. Wrong on all counts.

More recently in King County, while trying to strengthen restrictions on rural development, a proposal was introduced that would have effectively eliminated construction of new private school facilities in unincorporated areas. Moved to action by literally hundreds of weekly e-mails and scores of parent testimony, the County Council voted in favor of a compromise plan that was hailed for its environmental sensitivity and the strong underlying principle that construction of ALL new schools – public and private – would fall under the same guidelines and scrutiny. No single school or group could have managed that show of voice and numbers. It took a coordinated, collective effort to make those kinds of inroads.

### How to start

School groups serious about getting organized around policy issues usually appoint some liaison contact position on their governing board or parent-teacher association. WFIS regularly sends information in written and electronic form to school heads and also includes these action officers on lists when informed by member schools. In addition, the WFIS web site ([www.wfis.org](http://www.wfis.org)) can be a valuable resource site for information.

*For information about WFIS or this article, visit [www.wfis.org](http://www.wfis.org) or call our office at 253-912-5808.*

The liaison at each school develops a contact tree – through e-mail, phone calls or written notes - to each family in the school keeping them updated on pending issues, keeping them abreast of developments and alerting them when its time to make a personal contact with a policy maker. A new tool on the web site will allow an individual to simply enter their zip code and gain instant access – through e-mail – to their state and congressional elected officials. While not as personal as a written letter or phone call, last year this method proved effective in helping convince Congress to pass the new Education Savings Account tax option going into effect this coming January.

### Now's the time

No-cost access to the WASL assessment for private school families who wish to take it; Equitable application of surface water management fee policy (currently, private schools pay, public schools do not); Ensuring private school teachers have access to professional staff development opportunities; Completing phase III of the state K-20 telecommunications network linking private schools to the university-library-school video and data backbone; Reinstating the rights of private school special education students and parents in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act... all these initiatives – and more – are on the schedule these coming months for debate and action.

As parents, you have exercised your right to choose the place you feel is the best fit to educate your children. For most, this comes at a substantial sacrifice. Yet, it is also a decision that carries the responsibility to remain involved in the overall picture of education in this state. Private schools may be separate, but we are not apart. We are A PART. We have much to say... and our children have much to gain. It can't rest on the shoulders of a school head or a single advocacy group. It takes numbers. Imagine the collective power of this voice if magnified through a network of political action groups.