

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Relationship Building Is One of the Most Effective Advocacy Methods

Decision-makers are much more likely to be receptive to your advocacy efforts if you are already known and trusted by them. It is important to invest the time developing a personal relationship with members of your community and those with influence and power to make change happen.

Why Relationship-Building Works

- Decision-makers listen to those they already know and trust
- Regular engagement builds you into a reliable voice
- Getting to know stakeholders as people (their priorities, interests and values) can help you adapt your message to reach the right audiences
- When an issue comes up, you're already on their radar

Learn More

Boisvenue-Fox, M. (2018). [Relationships matter in politics](#). *The Political Librarian*, 4, Article 8.

Dooley, R. (2024). [Robert Cialdini's principles of influence have held up for 40 years. Here's why.](#) *Forbes*.

Know Your Audience and Align Your Messaging With Their Priorities

Whether you are doing individual outreach or developing a social media campaign, having a clear picture of your audience, their needs and their interests is essential. Ask yourself first:

- 1. Who is your target audience?** Who do you want to reach?
- 2. What do you know about them?** What are their priorities? What are their interests?
- 3. How does or can the library support these priorities?**

Get to Know Your Decision-Makers:

Each library sector has a different set of stakeholders. Some possibilities for your context may be:

- Public libraries: your library board members, local MPP, Municipal Councillor, Band Council, or other local leader.
- School libraries¹: your principal, superintendent, school board trustees, professional organizations, unions, subject matter association.
- Academic libraries: your institution's administration, faculty, leadership.
- Health libraries: hospital administration, clinical leadership, health authority decision-makers.
- Special libraries: your director, your client, funders, influential champions within your organization (even if they are not formal decision-makers), etc.

¹ In the current legislative context, the Ministry of Education has expanded its authority to intervene in school board governance, including [placing boards under supervision](#) or otherwise [limiting the role of trustees](#). As a result, decision-making authority may rest with a provincially appointed supervisor, and trustees may no longer be accessible or appropriate contacts for advocacy at the local level. If this is the case, school library professionals may choose to engage with stakeholders beyond school board trustees, including those at the provincial-level (e.g., appointed supervisor).

If you are advocating for your library **within your institution, like a university or college library, or a special library**, get to know your administration's strategic priorities. Find ways that the library can or already does align its offerings with those priorities. University libraries may also wish to connect with [Ontario Council of University Libraries](#) (OCUL), while college libraries may find it helpful to engage with [College Libraries Ontario](#) (CLO) on sector-wide issues.

For **school libraries**, consider aligning your advocacy with existing priorities and frameworks, such as your School Improvement Plan, school board strategic priorities, policies and directives (e.g., Policy/Program Memoranda), collective agreements, and [Ministry of Education curriculum](#) documents.

Similarly, if you are seeking to increase **local community support for your library**, think about the stakeholder you are trying to reach. This may be your local MPP or Municipal Council, small business owners, members of the public, or a community organization.

Identifying Decisions-Makers Through Power Mapping

Power mapping is a tool to help determine who holds power and influence over decisions you care about, their interests, and how you can reach them through your advocacy work. By mapping these relationships, you can focus your efforts where they will have the greatest impact.

Power Mapping Step-by-Step:

1. **Identify key decision-makers** - who has the authority to make decisions happen?
2. **Map influencers around them** - who already has relationships with these key decision-makers and can influence them?
3. **Assess power and position** - what is each person's level of influence and their stance on your issue?
4. **Target priority relationships** - build relationships with those with the most influence.
5. **Make a plan** - what is the best way to engage with each person?

TIP

Build Power Laterally

While identifying your stakeholders and target audience, remember to connect with your colleagues. Building strong relationships across your organization can help extend your reach and strengthen your advocacy. A colleague may have an established relationship or have access to spaces you may not. Creating a network of allies can help build power laterally and carry your message forward. Remember, advocacy is stronger together.

Municipal Associations

When connecting at a municipal level, public libraries can engage with their municipal association to support local advocacy efforts.

[Association of Municipalities of Ontario \(AMO\)](#)

[Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities \(FONOM\)](#)

[L'Association française des municipalités de l'Ontario \(AFMO\)](#)

[Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association \(NOMA\)](#)

[Ontario Small Urban Municipalities \(OSUM\)](#)

[Rural Ontario Municipal Association \(ROMA\)](#)

[Ontario Big City Mayors \(OBCM\)](#)

Speaking With a Clear and Unified Voice

Remember: If you are engaging in advocacy for libraries with MPPs or other provincial stakeholders, it is important that libraries speak with a clear and unified voice. The OLA works with the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL), libraries, and our government relations firm to develop long-term advocacy plans for libraries in line with our [Strategic Plan](#). As you undertake advocacy at the local level, you can help by staying connected.

1. **Please ensure that any local outreach you are doing aligns with OLA and FOPL's ongoing messaging.** You can learn more about our current government relations activities by checking out [our website](#). When in doubt, [reach out to us](#).
2. **Share your successes.** Do you have a great local advocacy initiative that other libraries could benefit from? Share your success with OLA and the sector.
3. **Share your concerns.** Have an advocacy concern that OLA and FOPL are not currently addressing? [Let us know!](#)

TIP

Get Help

If you are planning on undertaking a large-scale advocacy campaign, you may consider enlisting the services of an outside agency, such as a government relations firm, marketing agency or consultant. These can help with the planning and implementation and increase the impact of your advocacy.

What do we mean by 'large-scale advocacy campaign'?

A large-scale advocacy campaign is a coordinated, strategic, time-bound effort to influence public opinion or decision-making that targets system-level change (e.g., policy, funding, or legislation). Example: A province-wide campaign around school library staffing and funding, such as OLA's [Save Our School Libraries](#) campaign.

Demonstrating Library Impact

Research and evidence highlighting the impact of your library is a great way to support your advocacy efforts. Evidence can look like many things:

- a report on the social return on investment of your library (see page 32 for examples)
- highlights from recent program evaluations and customer satisfaction surveys
- stories and testimonials from library users about the impact of the library (see [Dear School Library](#) for example)
- data or research showing the impact of library programming, services, and collections on student success, graduation rates, and retention.
- and more

Evidence adds weight to your advocacy efforts, helping to demonstrate the real impact of library programming and services in your community.

See pages 31 to 33 for research on the impact of libraries.

TIP

Many free resources can support in measuring the impact of your programming and services:

- [Bridge Toolkit](#)
- [Valuing Ontario Libraries Toolkit \(VOLT\)](#)
- [Canadian School Libraries Research Toolkit](#)
- [The Impact of Canadian Public Libraries](#)
- [Canadian Association of Research Libraries \(CARL\) Measure Impact](#)
- [CARL Data Visualization Toolkit](#)
- [Project Outcome](#)

Any many more!

Whatever the priority, the library has a role to play:

- Improving math scores,
- Fostering evidence-based service-delivery,
- Increasing community safety,
- Engaging at-risk youth,
- Preserving Indigenous languages and cultures,
- Enhancing patient outcomes,
- And much more.

Align your messaging with the priorities of your local leaders.

TEMPLATE: [Download the Advocacy Issue Worksheet →](#)