

# Importance Of Advocacy In Achieving Policy Change: A California Case Study

**Policy change – at both the state and school-district levels – can help school districts initiate and sustain their outreach and enrollment work.**

States can take steps to facilitate school district action to connect uninsured students to health coverage. For example, children’s health advocates in California, led by the California Coverage and Health Initiatives, developed a policy idea for legislation that would incorporate schools as key messengers and a natural outreach conduit to impact the health trajectory of uninsured children. After working closely with health advocates, schools, and members of the state legislature, California passed legislation in 2014 that mandated that public school districts provide information about health insurance coverage options and enrollment assistance in enrollment forms to their students and families for the school years 2015 – 2018. We use this example as a case study on how your school or district can impact state and local policy on health insurance for your students.

## **AB 2706: What does it do?**

This law requires public schools to provide parents or legal guardians’ information about health care coverage options and enrollment assistance, authorizing schools to include a factsheet with their enrollment forms explaining basic information about affordable health care coverage options for children and families. The legislation also requires the California State Department of Education to develop a standardized template for the factsheet and the informational item.

## **The State Legislative Process: How it Happened.**

Child advocates in California helped to develop legislative language and worked to find a state legislator who was interested in introducing the bill, noting the crucial role schools could play in connecting children to health coverage. Once one had been identified, Assembly member Roger Hernández, advocates brought him information about how the bill would impact families in his district, who the bill would affect, and how many children it could reach. Advocates also invited him to visit a K-8 school district, Mountain View, in his own district that was already providing health enrollment information to families and connecting them with coverage so he could see for himself the impact it had. With information and support from schools, constituents, and advocates, Assembly member Hernández introduced the advocates’ idea as a bill (AB 2706) in the California legislature.

Throughout the process, the state legislator’s staff, advocates and other stakeholders worked together to refine the bill’s language to maximize the policy’s impact and address concerns about how it would be implemented. Advocates in both the health and education communities – including schools administrators and staff — played critical roles in convincing the relevant committees in the state legislature and the Governor’s office of the importance of this legislation. While the legislation sailed through the health committee without much debate, education committee members voiced concerns about the already stretched capacity schools in California face and school administrators who had been partnering on school-based enrollment work were critical in addressing those concerns.

Ultimately, the bill that passed the California state legislature and garnered the Governor’s signature was a weaker version of the policy advocates had initially proposed and was initially introduced. Unfortunately, some compromises had to be made to mollify opposition, including adding a “sunset” date, so schools would only be required to comply for the school years 2015-2016 and 2016-

2017, 2017-2018. Additionally, language was removed that would have required schools to share information about uninsured students, with parental consent, to certified enrollment counselors to help families enroll in health coverage.

Advocates are now working on an updated bill, AB 2308, which would extend the requirements of AB 2706 past the 2017-18 school year and also expand the policy to include community college and state universities. AB 2706 has helped move conversations about the impact of child health on academic performance forward. On the ground, this law has helped bring the school and health communities together by providing schools with accurate, free and easy-to-use customizable information such as flyers and toolkits, along with encouraging messages about ways families can access health coverage enrollment assistance. With strong partnerships in place and support from health and education advocates, schools are delivering accurate information about health coverage to millions of families across the state and encouraging families to take action to get covered.

### How Can You Make Your Voice Heard?

Your voice is important in creating policy change – whether in your school district, or at the state or federal level. You can send letters, make calls, schedule meetings with your elected officials when they are in your district, invite them to visit your school/place of work to see impact of the work you do or talk to the young people you work with, attend committee hearings, and use any other mechanism (particularly social media) you can to share stories. Hearing from school representatives, community based organizations, and constituents is very important! Legislators like to see community members attend hearings and voice their support and/or opposition on pending legislation. Making your voice heard doesn't have to end when the changes are adopted – be sure to tell your policy makers how adding a question to your school enrollment form has helped children in your school district so they can continue to strengthen and improve the policy.

**Learn what other districts have done to incorporate health outreach and enrollment in their policies.** Make some calls and obtain copies of school district health policies, which are public information. See if there is sample language that you can take and introduce to your administration and board to consider adding or amending to your district's policy.

**Board Resolutions.** Board resolutions affirm the district's stand on a given issue of importance that impact students and academic achievement. Pass a resolution affirming your district's commitment to helping get uninsured students the information and assistance they need to get enrolled!

**Identify resources and partners who can help guide you through drafting policy proposals and advise you on ways to effectively engage your district administrators and board.**

State and local school board associations play a key role in helping districts develop and maintain policies and policy manuals. Non-profit advocates are also great partners and will often have policy staff you can contact.

