As an educator, administrator, or school staffer, your days are built around the specific and exact tasks of providing instruction, assistance, and guidance for children within your care. You see the immediate benefits of studying for test, following the rules, and participating in activities that help children to grow and succeed. Many will say that you are on ‘the front lines.’

But what of the people who support education and work long hours, tirelessly, to ensure that children from all walks of life are given the opportunity to succeed? You may not see them on a regular basis, but they too, are hard at work for the cause of education.

Dr. Sally McConnell is the Associate Executive Director for Government Relations at an education association and her work entails making the unique role her members play in a school as visible as possible to policymakers. “Our members work very hard for the benefit of students and their families,” says McConnell, “and I believe they deserve everything we can do for them and more. It really is an honor to represent them on Capitol Hill and elsewhere.”

So what kind of work does McConnell, and others like her, do? Well, it’s varied and it’s complicated, but the outcomes of developing legislation can help reap huge rewards for many groups.

When a lobbyist is made aware of a concern, an unmet need or a strong interest on the part of his/her members or interest group, they set the wheels for change in motion by talking to congressional staffers and legislators by discussing various options and drafting legislative language – from a few sentences to more than a page – depending on the complexity of the issue. From this point the language is created as part of a bill that already exists or sometimes it is added to an entirely new part of a bill or current law. The process of gathering interest in an amendment necessitates numerous conversations with staff on a committee of jurisdiction (i.e. education or appropriations), as well as soliciting advocacy by the represented membership. Dr. McConnell says there are many competing interests at all steps in the process and thus, “there is always a need to be flexible and willing to compromise, as everyone wants to put his or her stamp on the legislative language or to change it in some way that will address their own concerns.”

McConnell lobbies Congress on issues of concern having anything to do with education and the welfare of children. A common point of discussion in educational circles is the subject of “the whole child” relating to the multiple and varied experiences of students in and out of school, including physical/mental health, nutrition, after-school experiences and more. “Our association has always lobbied for such things because we know that although these are often referred to as “nonacademic”
needs, they really do have an impact on academic success or failure.” She adds that her work with the executive branch, including the White House and the U.S. Department of Education depends in part on who the President is, and what his position is on specific issues.

But even support of the Executive Office doesn’t ensure success, since difficulties can arise in the form of lack of interest in a lobbyist’s issue, competing interests, shortage of time for a bill to make it through the legislative process, or a political climate on “the Hill” that is counter to increased funding. “Funding is always a concern for education,” stresses McConnell, “and there are always people and groups in disagreement with what we’re trying to do. Their voices are louder than ours, and according to polls, right now education is not the highest issue of concern amongst the public – and that makes it hard to get legislators to pay a lot of attention to education.”

What does it take for a lobbyist to advance the concerns of public education? Peter Spadafore, Assistant Director of Government Relations for the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB), says that by having one voice represent an issue, it provides an effective legislative process and input that might not otherwise reach the attention of legislators.

Dr. McConnell agrees and says that while lobbying for adequate funding and excellent educational programs is part of it, others play a role in the success of public education as well. “Public education is under fire in this country, in part because the media tend to report the negative or sensational and do not pay sufficient attention to the wonderful work general public, as having just as much impact on the future of education as she does in her lobbying work. “People need to establish a working relationship with the policymakers who represent them – a U.S. Senator, a U.S. Representative, a state legislator, even a local city council member. Federal legislators form advisory committees of educators and others, and ask their opinions on legislative initiatives. I would love to see more educators participate in such groups since they can share with their representatives what is needed by the schools and by the students who attend.” Though it expected to make its way into law.

“Mark-up” (noun) – When a committee meets to amend and vote on a bill, the meeting is called a mark-up.

“Mark up” (verb) – The act of amending, voting, etc, on a bill in a committee meeting is known as marking up the bill.

Chairman’s mark – The bill that emerges from the aforementioned committee.

Motion to recommit – is a parliamentary maneuver attempting to get a bill sent back to the committee instead of being voted on by the full House or Senate. It’s an effort to kill a bill or delay it so long that it won’t be passed.

Floor – The House or Senate chamber, where bills are ultimately voted on by the full House of Representatives or the full Senate.

“The other side of the aisle” – is a reference made by a Senator or Representative about an individual or group who is a member of the other major political party.

“The other side of the Dome” … “the other chamber” … “the other body” — all refer to the House if you’re in the Senate and to the Senate if you’re in the House. (The Dome is, obviously, the Capitol Dome.)

Referral – The process by which the House or Senate parliamentarian assigns a newly introduced bill to one or more committees.

- Sequential referral – means the bill is sent to more than one committee, but only one acts on the bill in a period of time – they take turns, so to speak.

- Joint referral – is when more than one committee receives the bill and all are free to work on it in the same period of time.

To “table” – means to kill a bill. (“That bill was tabled.”) When it’s tabled, action on it is postponed indefinitely.

H.R. (number) – Is a bill introduced in the House of Representatives. Its counterpart is S. (number) These are the identifications for most bills introduced in Congress.

H.Res. (number) – Is a House resolution that refers to something only affecting the House itself, such as rule governing the behavior of House members. Counterpart is “S. Res. (number).” There are also resolutions meant to be the same in both chambers, such as “House Joint Resolution (number),” “Senate Concurrent Resolution (number),” etc.

Say That Again?

By Forrest Clift

As with any profession, there is a set of terms or ‘jargon’ that is used to communicate actions and/or ideas. If you’re on the outside, it might all seem a bit…unclear. You may hear people toss certain words about, but how much do you really know about what specific terms mean?

Take a look at the following list and see which ones you’ve heard used on the news, in press conferences, or come across in the newspaper.

“Christmas tree” – Is a “must-pass” bill, such as an appropriations bill which needs to pass in order for government programs to continue without a hitch; a bill to raise the limit of debt the federal government can take on, etc. People love to get their amendments attached to such bills because they know they’re likely to become law.

Vehicle – A bill that is moving, or expected, to move through the legislative process. There may be several versions of legislation on the same issue, but the vehicle is the one that is http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol3/iss2/9/