

# A Call to Philanthropists Who Advocate: Empower Your Peers to Get Involved

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There are so many myths and misconceptions about foundations doing advocacy, that when a funder who is skillful and savvy achieves success, it's a great opportunity to cut through the confusion and re-affirm the power of this work.

This is exactly what education funders in Texas have done. Your success in helping restore billions of dollars in funding for public education, and your plans for future advocacy, model ways foundations and donors engage in the policy process, and bring stakeholders who are voiceless into decision making that affects their lives. Your passionate and strategic work demonstrates and inspires how philanthropists can make our democratic process stronger and more representative.

We are thrilled that seven members of TEGAC are members of Exponent Philanthropy; they are foundations with few or no staff. We believe small foundations and donors have unique qualities that make them powerful advocates. More on those special qualities below.

**My main message to members of TEGAC is that educating and inspiring other philanthropists in Texas and around the country is a way you can leverage your work and your mindset of active engagement.**

Most of the country's 80,000-plus private foundations do not participate in policy. And the millions of individual philanthropists, who give through donor advised funds, giving circles, and their checkbooks, do not participate in policy.

A tremendous amount of power for good is going unused, untapped.

Dozens of Exponent Philanthropy members have discovered the power of advocacy as they journey to make impact on their chosen issues. Usually, what propels them into the policy arena is a frustration with the status quo.

By documenting stories of advocacy over the years, and studying how philanthropists like you do this work, **I have learned that small foundations and donors not only *can* engage in policy, but have unique non-dollar assets that make them truly effective as advocates.** These non-dollar assets include access to legislators, deep knowledge of issues, broad perspective on communities, connections and networks, and the freedom to commission research and disseminate the results.

What do these philanthropists accomplish? Here are some examples:

- A funder in California is building a network to engage parents in decision making about the public school system's budget, and to create pathways for parents to get elected to the school board. The network is making the school system more accountable to the needs of students and their families.
- A small public foundation in Kansas spearheaded a campaign to pass a smoking ban by the state legislature, long supported by the public but blocked by powerful interests. The foundation commissioned a public poll and developed innovative ways of delivering the results to legislators.
- A funder in Connecticut catalyzed reform of the state's juvenile justice system, to provide more counseling and support services to at-risk youth, keep more young people out of prison, and save public dollars.

Many more philanthropists would consider advocacy as a strategy--and engage in policy with passion--IF they were more aware of its effectiveness and of the legal rules. Exponent Philanthropy is working to provide this education through materials, programs, and networks.

But there's another barrier. **Most donors, benefactors, and trustees are not aware of the power and influence they hold in talking with legislators--at the local, state, or national level.**

People in the business world understand that if they do not participate at the policy table, someone else will make decisions that affect them--with potentially harmful consequences. Business people, therefore, make policy engagement a normal part of their operations. It is astonishing that philanthropists who created wealth by successfully building businesses, and who advocated legislators to pursue their business interests, do not apply this same mindset to their philanthropy.

We in philanthropy and nonprofits need to integrate policy engagement into our mindset and normal operations. We must acknowledge that if we do not engage, others will make decisions that impact our sector. Others will make decisions that impact people in the communities we serve who do not have a voice.

**We urge TEGAC members to join us in helping donors, benefactors, and trustees all over the country recognize their power and lend their voices to the urgent issues they care about--whether it be in education, hunger, housing, health, or the environment.**

**You have found your voice at the policy table. No one is better positioned than you to help other donors find *their* voices.**