

# HOW TO TESTIFY

A "How-To" Guide on Testifying Before Legislators



tes·ti·fy | verb

*"to make known a personal conviction."*

- Merriam-Webster



Check out all past MCPS BOE testimonies!

## What is testifying? Why should we care?

Testifying is when individuals are able to voice a prepared speech, usually citing personal anecdotes and statistics, to local, state, and national policy makers. It's a chance to ensure these officials, other parties in the room, and those that are watching at home on television are hearing why you care about certain issues. The ultimate goal is to potentially sway decisions your way—decisions impacting the community at large! We need to **SHOW UP**, **STAND UP**, and **SPEAK UP**, and **you** can be a part of that narrative of change.

# How do I register?

Most hearings will require you to sign up to testify or send in your testimony in ADVANCE. Find the date of the hearing you wish to testify at and check their website routinely to submit what is required on time. Some sessions will also request you bring a specified number of physical copies of your speech on the actual day of testimony.

## Montgomery County Board of Education

- General information about public participation: <https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/boe/community/participation.aspx>
- Send testimony in advance:
  - E-mail to [boe@mcpsmd.org](mailto:boe@mcpsmd.org)
  - Fax to 301-279-3860 Mail to 850 Hungerford Drive, Suite 123, Rockville, MD 20850
  - Bring 20 copies of your testimony for board staff and press.

## Montgomery County Council

- General information about public hearings: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/COUNCIL/PHSignUp.html>
- Sign up to testify: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/COUNCIL/PHSignUp.html#signup>
- Send testimony 48 hours in advance:
  - E-mail to [county.council@montgomerycountymd.org](mailto:county.council@montgomerycountymd.org)
  - Sign-up to testify by 5:00 pm the day prior to a hearing scheduled at 1:30 pm
  - Sign-up to testify by 10:00 am the day of a hearing scheduled at 7:30 pm
  - Bring 15 copies of your testimony

## Takoma Park City Council

- General information about meetings and documents: <https://takomaparkmd.gov/government/city-council/meetings-and-documents/>
- Send Council Comment: <https://takomapark.seamlessdocs.com/f/CouncilComment>
- Send testimony by noon the day of the hearing
- Bring 10 copies of your testimony



*Our lives begin to end  
the day we become  
silent about things that  
matter.*

*- Martin Luther King Jr.*



# What should I write?

For some, this might be the most challenging part of the testifying process: writing the speech! But don't worry, we're here to give you some guidance.

## Before you start, think about the following...

- What are you testifying about? Is there a set topic, or is it an open discussion?
- Pick a topic you are knowledgeable and passionate about.
- **Best method:** a personal story. You don't need to dramatize, but the board wants to hear the real experiences of students. If you're telling another student's story, make sure you ask them & keep them anonymous.
  - Example: if the hearing is on school lunches and you're a FARMS recipient, it's more impactful for you to talk about that experience than rattle off statistics.
- That being said, stats are useful! MCPS publishes lots of data on their school demographics. Use that to your advantage, but make sure it's brief and ties back to your **emotional appeal**.
- **Balance your rhetoric:** strong language is good, exaggeration is not. Don't feel the need to make your language overly formal, but don't be too colloquial either.
- **Easy formula:** Introduction (including "Superintendent Smith, President Evans, and Members of the Board...include your 'thesis' or 'main ask')...Personal Story...Research-based argument...strong concluding rhetoric.

Summary plus some more details to keep in mind...

- **Introduction:** This can include your name, grade, school, pronouns, and something you're proud of (accomplishment or aspect of your personality).
- **Anecdotes:** Facts are important, but personal stories are more evocative, and will often set you apart. Remember, they'd love to hear your perspective, and not solely statistics they can find themselves!
- **Tone:** Try to sound informative, but after all, you're a student! It doesn't have to be super formal. Like we said, you can try to speak in *fairly* colloquial language: it can make it easier for the audience to follow along, and sometimes also allows for your passion for the topic to shine more brightly.
- **Word Choice:** Use appropriate words for the context, and keep your audience in mind. (Please avoid sounding condescending or antagonizing your audience!)
- **Concision:** When you testify, you won't have a lot of time (usually ~3 minutes). Therefore, you should focus on the basics: it's crucial that you're able to clearly get your point across in the timeframe that you're allotted!



# What should I NOT do?

## TRY NOT TO...

### **Be vague.**

Make sure your testimony is proofread and consistent with your main point. It should be clear what you are saying and why it is of importance. Use explanation when needed and give appropriate detail if it further develops your message. Anyone in the room should be able to understand what you're talking about without context.

### **Talk too much.**

Less is more, while you don't want to oversimplify your message, you shouldn't need to over-explain yourself. Most testimonies should be at most 2 minutes long. Every word should be intentional so practice making your statement clear and concise. Avoid going on tangents or straying off-topic. Keep your speech direct and straight forward. Practice your testimony beforehand with a timer to ensure you are not speaking for too long. People will lose interest and tune you out if you don't give them strong buzzwords to latch on to.

### **Be evasive.**

If testifying in front of a panel that is asking you questions, don't dodge the bullet. If you have done the necessary preparation you should know your topic through and through. Don't avoid giving direct answers or it will come off as though you lack the credentials or are not sufficiently educated in testifying for this topic. Questions may be uncomfortable but they should always be answered in short, direct responses. If you don't know the answer to a question it is okay to say so and move on.

### **Be fidgety.**

Practice giving your testimony in front of the mirror. Avoid swaying side to side or messing with your paper or the mic in front of you. Practice maintaining your composure under anxiety and ensure that your posture is upright and reflects your confidence.

### **Avoid eye contact.**

The panel of people you are testifying to should be the only people you look at. Avoid looking around the room, at your paper, or at the mic. Sometimes this can feel uncomfortable but it conveys a sense of strength and urgency that helps ensure your audience is paying attention.

### **Confuse opinion for fact.**

There is a fine line between "I believe" and "Source A states that". Distinguish between personal anecdotes and scientific and mathematical evidence. You should be using both of these to create a personal and reasonable message but they should not contradict each other or be false statements. You may feel a certain way about an issue but unless you have proof to back up your opinion, it is not valid to be used in testimony.

### **Come unprepared.**

Run through your testimony until you have it almost entirely memorized. You should know your topic and position like the back of your hand and be prepared to speak without hesitation. Part of being prepared is being dressed appropriately. Make sure your attire is appropriate for the event and reflects your professionalism and confidence. Avoid wearing ripped clothing, graphic tees, hats or anything that covers your eyes and face (unless for religious purposes), and neon colors or items that can be distracting to the audience.

### **Forget your purpose.**

You are testifying because you are passionate about the topic of discussion. Be sure to state why this topic is personal or how it impacts you or a community you care about. Make sure the purpose of your message is understood through your tone and vocabulary. What you say should reflect how you feel. You are testifying to deliver this message so don't allow mental distractions, the panels' response or the energy of the room deter you from putting your best foot forward during your testimony.

### **Give a summary.**

The biggest thing to avoid when testifying is coming off as uneducated about your topic. If you have prepared and done your research in advance, speaking about the topic at hand should come with ease. Now all you need to do is practice!



## Double check. Then practice!

1. The first thing to review before starting to practice your testimony, is the writing itself. It's important to have your writing **clear of all grammatical errors** before starting to rehearse the testimony.
2. After the writing is proofread and edited, the next steps to a successful testimony are to **read it out loud** to be able to pronounce all words and get the message across.
3. However, just reading the testimony out loud is not enough. It's important to **mark notes** in your testimony for places to **pause** when reading your testimony. In order to determine places to pause, you can analyze when **main points are emphasized** and when it's a good time to **look at your audience**.
4. When practicing, you should also make sure that you are **looking up** every once in a while to avoid looking at your paper the entire time. (Remember to blink, too!)
5. Remember to maintain an **appropriate speaking pace**: not too fast, not too slow, otherwise, the audience may lose interest or get confused.
6. Maintain good body language: sit/stand straight in order to appear more confident, and incorporate natural gestures when providing more emphasis,
7. After continued practice out loud by yourself, you will start to **memorize the testimony** which will make you more confident in what you are speaking!
8. Before the actual testimony, try to **share your presentation** with department heads, friends, and family to give advice on your strengths and weaknesses. Then keep practicing...in front of the mirror, your friends, parents, and even to your dogs and cats!

### But wait! When I get there, how can I read the room?

1. Before you enter the room, **identify your allies and who else will be testifying** (you should all be bringing something different to the table).
2. **Get to know the legislator(s)/staff** sponsoring your bill. They might help you answer questions like...
  - a. Which legislators are going to support your bill? Which are going to be challenges? Which are swing votes?
3. Try and **include data** for the entire region represented by the committee (whole county/state) in order to engage all members. You can refer to your written testimony which legislators will have in front of them.
4. You can begin **speaking once the chair identifies you**.
5. Don't forget to **thank the chair and members** at the beginning of your remarks!



## Here are some resources for research.

**Remember, some of these journalism sources may be biased with a perspective different than your own!**

### **Official County/State Website.**

This is probably your most credible source for easy-to-understand graphics and breakdowns of a policy/topic. Here, you can find links to more detailed papers if necessary. You can also watch an previously-aired testimony ("MCPS Live Meetings") or even view their written PDF submissions.

### **Google-able Statistics.**

Try Googling your desired figures, with a helpful trick of adding "MCPS" or some other credible organization to bring up more reliable results in the search engine. A way to search for a summary of individual MCPS High School reports is by typing in "\_\_\_\_\_ High School Stats MCPS" and clicking on one of the first MCPS links with #XYZ in its title. This works for middle schools, too!

### **NEA.**

The National Education Association often include detailed studies on a number topics related to your schools. It even has its own tab: "Issues and Action," where you can find many different statistics for any given concern.

### **NY Times.**

While a little more rare, the NY Times occasionally reports on Maryland education and even some MCPS issues.

### **NPR.**

The National Public Radio has plenty of school-related issues being discussed both in article and in auditory format. NPR has a great reputation for conducting in-depth research and fact-checking themselves, as well as for covering unique but significant stories that may not have been covered otherwise.

### **Bethesda Magazine, WTOP.**

BM and WTOP issues often cover many Montgomery County events with quotes from other civilian testimonies. Make sure to double-check smaller, local sources with official sites.

## Here's a general sample.

*Good evening, members of the board, students, and members of this community. My name is John Doe and I'm a sophomore at Walter Johnson High School, where I have been an active member of the arts community and with the upcoming budget being put together, I would like to share the importance of the arts in our schools and the importance of funding the arts in our schools.*

*The arts program changed my life in school and out. Since I played in our schools musical, opportunity after opportunity opened up for me. Soon after this performance I started to attend an acting program that has given me an outlet for my passion. In this passion, I have found something that I plan on sticking with for life. A passion in which I would not have been introduced to, without the arts program.*

*Our education system was created to prepare students for their futures; and yes, there are students who may have futures in math, science, or sports; but just as important are the students who have a future in the arts and by neglecting the arts, we are refusing to prepare our students and better our future. There are students who share my story of striking a passion with the arts; but there are more students who will never be given the chance to strike this passion. Expanding the arts program is the only way to guarantee every student this chance.*

*When we look at our best performing schools, they have the strongest and largest arts programs. There has been countless studies proving that involvement in the arts improves academic performance and can serve as an outlet for stress. Sign after sign point to the need for growing the arts program, but it can not be done without more funding. Without this funding, we are not giving every student a chance, as not everyone is financially in a position to be involved with the arts on their own.*

*Members of the board we are faced with a choice today. Will we continue to neglect our students preparation for the future they could have, or will we fulfill education's purpose in preparing our students, improving their performance, and create a more equitable world?  
Thank you.*

## **And here is another example!**

Good evening Superintendent Dr. Smith and members of the Board of Education. My name is Hana O'Looney, I am a sophomore at Richard Montgomery High School and a proud biracial, half-Japanese student.

I attended Rachel Carson Elementary, a primarily White school located in a primarily White neighborhood, where there was maybe one other Asian kid in my class. I remember being self-conscious about the food I brought in for lunch every day and my envy for the kids who had Lunchables and Dunkaroos. I also, much to my regret, remember feeling embarrassed every time my mom came to pick me up instead of my dad, who looked like everyone else's parents. The uniformity of the student population made me feel isolated, and I spent much of my early education learning to conform with my peers instead of speaking my mind.

What I didn't know at the time were the statistics. Rachel Carson Elementary School now has a racial makeup that is 50% White and has a 20% FARMs rate, while Brown Station Elementary School, less than a mile away and in the same Quince Orchard High School district, has a racial makeup that is 10% White with a 66% FARMs rate. Families with children attending these schools drive on the same roads, walk on the same sidewalks, and shop at the same grocery store. And yet these 6-12 year old children, our students, are polarized from one another, spending their childhoods in disparate communities because of an invisible line on a boundary map and the residue of segregation here in Montgomery County.

I am now a student of Richard Montgomery, a high school that prides itself on its student diversity, and I am proud to report that diverse schools are attainable, and have been absolutely instrumental in my growth both as an individual, and in my ability to empathize. My friendgroup boasts students from all across the globe, and from various backgrounds, only because I have had the privilege to attend a school that values diversity and inclusivity.

The statistics are clear—racially diverse schools build students' confidence, foster creativity, and improve test scores. If I had diverse classmates back when I was in Elementary school, maybe I would have been comfortable enough to share my food and teach my friends about my culture instead of tucking it away.

Dr. Smith and Members of the Board of Education, Montgomery County should not be allowed to continue to boast our student diversity if we don't make an effort to promote and preserve it. We are so lucky to have so many students of different backgrounds here in MCPS, but the de-facto segregation of our schools has rendered it useless. MCPS needs to be the pioneering school system to abolish this pattern of school and community segregation that we see not just here, but throughout the country, so that we can prepare our students for a new, inclusive and diverse workforce.

- Hana O' Looney