Surveys consistently reveal that most Americans believe their elected officials “don’t care what people like me think.” That is one reason few people make an effort to have a voice in politics and government. There may be other reasons: They are busy making a living and raising a family; they distrust politics and politicians; or, they are not familiar with the legislative process.

Based on my 30 years of working behind the scenes in politics, I know that almost all elected officials want to have contact with their constituents, care about voters’ opinions, and want to represent the opinions of their constituents. It is a matter of self-interest: It helps them get re-elected.

The fact that the vast majority of people never contact their elected officials magnifies the influence of those who make the effort to have their opinions heard. On major, controversial issues, most legislators have well-established positions. But they vote on thousands of bills every session and a relatively small number of people can influence how their legislators vote on many of those bills.

It is not hard to make your voice heard but it requires some time and effort to stay informed on issues and stay in contact with your representatives in the legislature.

First, you have to vote. People who do not vote in elections are invisible to legislators. Elected officials don’t notice that these people exist and thus these constituents’ opinions have little influence. Nearly all candidates target their campaigns to frequent voters to make the most efficient use of their time and money. They obtain lists of those who vote in party primaries, general elections, municipal elections, and school board elections.

Voting, however, is the bare minimum; it only allows you to express your opinion every two or four years. You can be much more influential by establishing a relationship with your legislators.

If you have any doubt about who your state representative or state senator is, go to Texas Legislature Online at www.capitol.state.tx.us. On the homepage, you can type in your address and the site will return the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of your federal and state legislators.

From there, you can click on a name and go to the legislator’s webpage where you will usually find his or her biography, news releases, newsletters, district map, committee assignments, and lists of bills authored or co-authored. All of this information will help you understand the background, positions, and interests of your state representative and senator.

Visit the district office of your representative and your senator to introduce yourself and meet the office staff. Nearly all of your contacts with legislative offices will start with staff members, and you should know their names and titles. While you are there, ask to be included on the legislator’s newsletter mailing list and ask to be notified if the legislator holds town hall meetings. You should also call or visit the legislator’s Capitol office in Austin and become familiar with that staff.

Once you have introduced yourself, there are a number of ways to maintain contact with the legislator’s office and build a relationship:

• Invite your representative and your senator to attend school events and performances, in writing and well in advance. You do not have to invite them to speak or participate but if they attend, it is always extremely important to recognize and introduce them. Ask them to visit a regular classroom, specifically for elementary music where TAKS objectives are covered.

• Notify your legislators of any awards your students receive. Many legislators send out letters or certificates of congratulations to constituents so you should provide a list of names and addresses.

by John S. Bender

Now is the time to begin developing positive relationships with your legislators to gain their support for music education.
Attend your legislator’s town hall meetings or public events. Usually, there is a clear distinction between officeholder activities and political campaign activities. You can have a working relationship with your legislators without participating in political activities or providing political support. However, if you publicly support or contribute money to a legislator’s opponent, it most likely will affect your working relationship.

The better informed you are about issues and legislation, the more effective you can be in expressing your opinions. The Internet gives everyone access to many of the resources used by lobbyists and political professionals.

At Texas Legislature Online, you can search for bills by subject or keyword, find the status of bills, and read text and analyses of bills. You can create tracking lists of bills and even sign up to receive automated email notifications when any action occurs on a bill.

There also are websites for the Texas Senate (www.senate.state.tx.us), the Texas House of Representatives (www.house.state.tx.us) and the Governor (www.governor.state.tx.us).

The Senate and House websites provide streaming video of their sessions and most committee hearings held in Austin. There are also online newsletters that report and comment on governmental and political news in Austin. Some of their content is free but more detailed information is available to paid subscribers. Three of these services are: Harvey Kronberg’s Quorum Report (www.quorumreport.com), Texas Weekly (www.texasweekly.com) and Mike Hailey’s Capitol Inside (www.capitolinside.com). They provide email alerts on breaking news and daily clipping services listing legislative and political news articles gathered from statewide newspapers and television and radio stations.

The most effective way to express your opinions to your legislators is through a personal letter mailed to their offices. Letters usually have a better chance of being seen by a legislator than an email or a staff member’s notes about a telephone call. You should try to limit your letters to one page, use well-reasoned arguments, and always be polite and respectful.

Unless you want to communicate with the author of a specific bill or the chair of a committee, you should contact only your own representative and senator. Don’t bother to contact every member of the legislature. Legislative offices don’t have time to deal with communications from outside of their district.

When the legislature is in session, legislators and their staffs are often too busy to respond to every constituent. If you make your contacts during the interim period between sessions, you are likely to receive more attention.

When you approve of the votes and actions of your legislators, take time to let them know. And when they vote against your interests, you should express your disappointment, respectfully and with reasons for your disagreement. Legislators should be held accountable for their votes and their actions and need to know you pay attention to what they are doing.

John Bender is a public affairs and communications consultant in Austin.

Editor’s Note: As John Bender explains, now is the perfect time to begin building relationships with your legislators. As soon as you schedule your fall or holiday concert, send an invitation by mail for your representative and senator to attend. Also, invite them to come observe your classroom and meet your students. When you see them, encourage them to support legislation that does not erode student opportunities to participate in music and other fine arts classes in school.