

CommonCall: Mobilizing advocates for Texas schoolchildren

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Charles Foster Johnson approaches public education with the fervor of an evangelist, committed to converting pastors into advocates for the schools in their neighborhoods and in all Texas communities.

“It begins with simple awareness,” said Johnson, executive director of [Pastors for Texas Children](#). “The minister is a broker for goodness. A person goes into ministry to cooperate with God in building the kingdom of God.”

Serve the common good

That means working for the common good to benefit all God’s children, he insisted.

Most ministers recognize it serves the common good when all children have access to quality education, he added. They just need somebody to help them recognize the urgency of becoming advocates for children and the schools that educate them.

“Pastors are called on by everyone to do everything,” said Johnson, whose Texas Baptist pastorates include Second Baptist Church in Lubbock and Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio. “They have pressing duties that make demands on their time. So, the challenge is getting a share of the minister’s time and energy.”

Johnson and his organization help direct ministers toward purposeful

activities on behalf of public education—preferably activities from which they can see an immediate positive impact.

Desire to do good

Most ministers respond eagerly to a ministry that meets an immediate need at a local school, he noted.

“Ministers want to do good,” he said, and they want to involve their church members in helping their communities. That may include collecting supplies for a neighborhood school or sponsoring a teacher-appreciation event, he noted.

The next step for involvement is public policy advocacy, and that’s a tougher sell, Johnson acknowledged. But pastors who take the time to visit with a state representative or senator almost invariably discover lawmakers are eager to hear from ministers in their districts.

Build relationships

The most challenging level of involvement is building and sustaining relationships—both with elected officials and with local schools, Johnson observed. In terms of building relationships with lawmakers, ministers have more clout than they realize, he noted.

“Those state representatives and state senators know the minister isn’t getting anything out of it personally, other than advocating for God’s common good,” he said.

See lives transformed

Building a long-term relationship with a neighborhood school offers church members the opportunity to see lives transformed, Johnson said.

“We need church people who will mentor kids, particularly from the time

they are in preschool until they complete the third grade, to help ensure they are reading at grade level," he said. "Mentors change kids' lives."

Reading at grade level by the third grade serves as the single greatest indicator for future success in life, Johnson said. Third graders who cannot read at grade level are four times less likely to graduate from high school than their peers who are proficient readers.

Begin with specific and intentional prayer

A congregation can begin building a relationship with a school in its neighborhood by praying, Johnson said.

"Be intentional about it," he advised. "Pray every Sunday and every Wednesday for the children in those schools and the teachers and principals who serve them. Don't just pray in general for all the schools. Pray specifically for the school your church has adopted."

Earn trust

Next, church leaders need to establish relationships with school leaders and earn their trust.

"Every pastor should be close friends with the school superintendent and with the principal of the school their church has adopted," he said. "That means pastors have to submit themselves to the needs of the school."

It also means being consistent and reliable—following through on commitments and meeting needs throughout the school year when the principal identifies them, not just when they fit conveniently into the church calendar.

As churches become increasingly involved with a local school, it makes a difference in how members view public policy related to education, Johnson observed. And in his eyes, that means fully funding the 8,500 public schools

in Texas and resisting any attempts to take public dollars and send them to private schools.

“It should be the mission of every church to advance the interests of all that is just, fair and equitable in the realm of public policy,” he said.

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