

GUIDE TO HOSTING A CANDIDATES' FORUM

An effective way to engage your community and demonstrate the value of your PTA is to host a candidate's forum. The forum allows concerned parents and other voters an opportunity to become better informed about their choices for elected officials during election season.

While IRS regulations prevent tax-exempt organizations like PTAs from supporting or opposing candidates, they do allow such organizations to host nonpartisan candidates forums. According to the IRS, such forums are an acceptable form of voter education. You may even consider partnering with other civic organizations in your community to host the forum.

What is a candidate's forum?

A candidate's forum allows candidates for public office to express their views openly so audience members can understand their positions and make informed voting choices. Possible formats include the following:

- Predetermined questions
- Candidate speeches
- Panel discussion
- Audience question-and-answer session

Whatever the format, the forum must allow each invited candidate an equal and fair opportunity to express his or her position on issues.

What questions should be asked?

Depending on the candidates for a particular elected position you choose to participate in your forum, the questions may be different. However, some topics that may be considered are:

Why are the candidates interested in this position?

What are their top 3 priorities during their term in office?

Illinois, funding crisis – in particular school funding

Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) and Senate Bill 7

Unfunded mandates

Look at the Illinois PTA Legislation Platform, <http://www.illinoispta.org/Legislation/Legislation%20Platform.pdf>, for more information on our positions for ideas for questions to use at your forum.

Who should be invited?

Important: All candidates registered with the secretary of state (or other elections certifying body) and vying for a particular elective position should be invited to attend and informed about the presentation format. Candidates do not have to attend for the forum to meet IRS rules, but all candidates must be offered the chance to attend. The IRS can penalize tax-exempt organizations that host a forum that favors or opposes any candidate.

How is a candidate's forum organized?

Select a date at least two weeks before the primary or election. This maximizes the number of citizens who have not yet voted.

Invite ALL candidates for the selected offices four weeks in advance of the forum date. Include date, time, location, and sponsoring organization(s) and format for the forum. Request that candidates confirm by phone and in writing their desire to participate in the forum.

Contact the candidates who have confirmed their attendance approximately two weeks in advance of the forum with any predetermined questions and a reminder of the details of the forum.

Decide on the structure of your event, including time limits for each portion of the program. Choose a moderator who can treat all candidates fairly and who is not publicly allied with any candidate. The moderator's comments and attitude should be completely impartial.

Select a sufficiently large school location that is accessible to all those with physical disabilities. While venues other than schools could be used, PTAs are encouraged to show off their schools and the good work they are doing there.

Acoustics are important. Ensure that the candidates, moderator, or other speakers can be heard in every part of the room. Test microphones to ensure they work properly.

Pay for promotional materials, but do not pay for any candidate expenses, such as travel to the event or printing of campaign-specific promotional literature.

How is a candidate's forum promoted?

Once you have received commitments to attend from two or more candidates, you should promote the event. In all communications, you should emphasize the nonpartisan nature of the event and the method used to qualify candidates for inclusion in the event (e.g. all candidates registered with election body as of a certain date) Avoid all language that might be seen as biased for or against individual candidates. All written materials should be neutral in content and tone.

Vehicles you could use to promote the event include the following:

- Newsletters
- School bulletin boards
- Websites
- E-mail
- Fliers
- Posters
- The school marquee
- Newspaper and other media calendar listings (be aware of print deadline, often a week before desired print edition)
- Lawn signs

Distribute materials to all segments of the community, not just to certain organizations that might favor one candidate or another. Encourage the whole community to attend in all of your communications.

What should happen at the forum?

Once again, the event should be as bias-free as possible.

- Board members and event organizers should not wear campaign buttons or otherwise endorse a candidate at the organization's event.
- If a panel or question-and-answer format is used, questions should be prepared and asked by a nonpartisan panel or the public. Topics should cover a wide range of issues of general interest to the public. Prepare 25% to 50% more questions on various subjects than there is time available to ask. If more than one group is sponsoring the forum, solicit questions from each. This will provide a cushion if candidates do not take the full time to answer one or more of the questions. You do not want any "dead time" in a forum.
- Questions should be worded so that a simple YES/NO answer is not convenient for the candidate. The objective is to allow the candidates to share their view on issues and the attendees to make up their minds about who may be the best person for the job.
- Any debate must have at least two opposing candidates. If only one candidate will be appearing, you should cancel the forum.
- Candidates should sit or stand facing the audience. Provide a modesty skirt at the candidate table.
- Candidates should have water, a note pad, pen or pencil, and a tented name sign visible by both the moderator and the audience.
- The order of candidates' beginning statements, answering questions, and closing statements should be rotated fairly and provided to the moderator prior to the forum.
- Review the format with the candidates before you begin. Introduce them to the moderator and review time limits and other ground rules you may have established.
- When you begin, have the moderator explain the format, time limits, and ground rules to the audience. If everyone understands the process, you are less likely to have interruptions.
- Do not declare a "winner."
- Do not urge members of your PTA to support or oppose any candidate.
- Even though an organization can express an opinion about an elected official's position on an issue, avoid doing so during a campaign. Do not ask a candidate to publicly endorse any issue.
- Regular members and board members can support or oppose candidates as private citizens, but they must not associate their political activity with PTA.
- Establish ground rules for distribution of campaign materials by candidates, and do not allow PTA members in an official capacity to hand out the materials.

A candidate's forum is one way your PTA can offer valuable information to the people in your community and create an opportunity for community building. Your PTA will benefit through increased visibility and being seen as an important organization interested in the welfare of the entire community.

Additional document included:
Sample Invitation Letter

PTA Letterhead

DATE

Candidate Name
Address
City, State Zip

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

The (name of PTA) wishes to invite you to participate in a (Board of Education, State House of Representatives, State Senate, Federal House, Federal Senate) Candidates Forum, (insert day of week and date). The Forum will begin at (insert time) o'clock in the evening and will last one hour. The news media have been invited to cover the event. The Forum will be held at (location of forum).

The purpose of this forum is to give candidates for (insert office) an opportunity to address a wide range of issues that affect our school district.

The following opening question will be asked of all candidates:

Sample Question:

What are your priorities with respect to issues in this campaign involving funding of public education?

Please accept or decline this invitation in writing and by phone within two weeks of receiving this letter. You may call [phone number] if you or your staff has questions.

Upon receipt of your confirmation, a list of possible questions will be provided to you.

Thank you for your time. We believe this is a great opportunity for you, our many members, and all the voters of (insert name of City).

Sincerely,

(Insert name of PTA) President