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Guide to Conducting Candidate/Issue Forums

PTAs may host candidate and issue forums. The goal of the PTA in conducting nonpartisan candidate forums is to provide information directly from the candidates about their positions on a variety of issues, so that voters can make an informed, responsible choice when voting. In an issue forum, PTAs should remain neutral unless their voting body has given permission to take a specific position. In this way PTA fulfills its goals of being a relevant resource for families and communities and helps individuals become informed advocates for the education and well-being of all children.

The following pages provide guidance for your PTA to hold a successful candidate or issue forum for your school district. You will learn:

- Definition of a forum
- Why candidate or issue forums are conducted
- How to conduct various types of forums

What Is a Forum?

A forum is a public meeting or assembly for open discussion. At a candidate forum, speakers answer questions directly from audience members, panelists, or a moderator, but do not directly engage with each other. Speakers may be on stage simultaneously, or at separate times.

If your format requires a moderator, you may consider a person that is not associated with a political interest group to provide a neutral and objective position. Organizations such as The League of Women Voters, American Association of University Women, or other community groups familiar with the issues and candidates may be better qualified to ensure the forum is noncommercial, nonsectarian, and nonpartisan. ***PTA does not participate in candidate nights, forums, or voter awareness programs with organizations that endorse candidates.***

Candidate and Issue Forums Are Conducted To:

- Inform the public
- Provide the public an opportunity to hear the candidates discuss important issues
- Provide candidates with information that concern their constituents
- Help voters make informed decisions
- Get candidates on the record so they can be held accountable for their stated positions on issues

- Provide an opportunity for candidates to get their message out to the voters
- Provide an important public service

Types of Forums

There are various type of forums that your PTA can hold to address the needs of your PTA and community members. Below are a few of the common types of forums that PTAs conduct:

School Board Candidate Forum

School Board elections are conducted differently around the state. Some local school boards hold elections every year, where others elect a portion of each school board every other year. Information on school board elections is available from your county clerk or the school district offices. Local school board elections are nonpartisan.

Your PTA may hold a forum to provide an opportunity for your community to hear from and ask questions of the candidates. You can prepare questions ahead of time for each candidate to answer, and/or allow questions from the audience. You will want to ensure that *all* candidates have an opportunity to answer each question (time limit on responses). Treat all candidates the same; particularly since many school board trustees have come from the district/local PTAs.

Remember that PTAs support or oppose issues, not candidates!

City Representative Candidate Forum

PTA may also hold a candidate / issues forum in your city or town to discuss the issues important in our community. You would follow the same guidelines offered in the School Board candidate forum.

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When hosting a forum on an issue of concern in your community, it may be more effective if it is a joint venture with your homeowner's association or other neighborhood group. If you're not sure what's going on in your community, be sure to subscribe to your district council's newsletter or blog, and get to know your local realtors. Also, many communities are taking their concerns to and sharing information on community social media channels. Become a part of these networks so that you can engage your PTA community.

Remember that PTAs support or oppose issues, not candidates!

Ballot Issues Forum

If your PTA wishes to hold a forum on a ballot issue, such as a proposition that affects

education, you may consider using the following format.

To host a forum for a ballot issue:

1. Form a panel of approximately five people who are knowledgeable on the subject, preferably some for and some against it, who can answer questions on the ballot issue. Your PTA may want to consider having one person from your school board, one administrator, one community member, and two others to be identified by your PTA. You might want to consider inviting one of your local state legislators to be on the panel, as well.
2. Your PTA might want to skip the gathering of questions ahead of time and go strictly with questions from the audience. If your PTA uses this approach, it is recommended that you have a couple of PTA volunteers to screen the questions from the audience so that the same question is not asked repeatedly. Screeners can also filter out confusing, poorly worded, and inflammatory questions. Each panelist might be given five minutes or less to introduce themselves and speak on the ballot issue so the audience knows who they are ahead of time.

Bond Elections Forum

From time to time, a school district may want to issue a bond to fund district needs that cannot be met merely by our tax dollars for public schools. The issuance of the bond must be approved on a ballot by the voting public. PTAs can be very helpful by working with the school district to conduct information sessions on the bond issue.

The Council PTA may also hold an election to determine if PTA will support the bond or not. Local PTAs take a vote at their local level, which they bring to the Council PTA meeting bond election. The Council PTA will take the position of the majority of their local PTAs on whether to support the bond election or not.

If the vote of the Council PTA is to support the bond election, PTAs may publicly demonstrate their support through their usual communication channels, including the posting of yard signs, buttons or t-shirts, etc.

To gain a better understanding of school bonds, please refer to the following documents:

- [Bonds 101: Questions and Answer](#)
- [Public Education Code](#)
- [Why Do Districts Issue Debt?](#)

Boundary Changes Forum

PTAs can facilitate a forum to learn about the school boundary proposals. If the PTA is unable to conduct a forum, formulate a questionnaire that can be completed by school district personnel and sent to your local newspaper with the school district's responses.

Remember to keep it nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and open-minded as this is a way to help the membership become knowledgeable and make informed decisions during election time. Be sure to get your Council PTA's approval of the questions to be presented.

How to Conduct a Candidate/Issue Forum

1. Review the Forum Timeline document available on the Texas PTA website.
2. Form an interview committee:
 - a. Compose and send a questionnaire to each of the candidates.
 - b. Conduct follow-up, in-person, or phone interviews. You must inform the candidate how you will use the information gathered from the questionnaire or interview. If you simply plan to publish the information to members and/or the public, make that clear. The interview questions and format should be the same for each candidate.
 - c. Interviews should be held in a non-threatening environment, such as a library, meeting room, or other public building.
 - d. Do not conduct your committee meeting in any place that may imply a position other than noncommercial, nonsectarian, or nonpartisan (i.e. place of worship, elected official's office, etc.).
3. Schedule a candidates' night or public forum alone or in conjunction with other organizations interested in public education, such as The League of Women Voters, American Association of University Women, or other community groups. Remember that a candidate cannot be asked to sign a pledge on any issue. ***PTA does not participate in candidate nights, forums, or voter awareness programs with organizations that endorse candidates.***
4. Have a GOTV (Get Out the Vote), PTA VOTES, or MOCK Student/Parent election campaign to encourage voters to head to the polls:
 - a. You may choose to write postcards or send e-mails. Provide information on when voting takes place, locations of the polls, and hours of voting.
 - b. You might also offer transportation options (i.e. bus pass, car pool, etc.) to those needing a ride to the polls.
 - c. Ready the phone number for the county election offices so individuals can call for answers to questions you might not be able to answer.
 - d. PTA can educate and encourage members to vote. However, you cannot ask members to vote for a particular candidate or party.
5. Announce all forums, candidate nights, etc. in the local papers, by placing flyers in the community (ask first), and on local radio or TV stations:
 - a. Your local communications chair should have a list of local media; if not, you may search the internet for this information.
 - b. If your local PTA or school district has a website, make sure to publish announcements there too – and include your website address ("URL") in all other publicity.
6. Notify Texas PTA about your forum. We can notify many of our other PTAs of your event details so they may attend, observe and learn, or team up with you.

Questions Format to Guide Your Forum

Your written questionnaire might consist of ten to fifteen questions that the candidate will complete and return to you prior to an interview or forum. Five to eight questions could be selected from the written document for the questions to be asked at the forum.

You will also want to consider questions that are relevant and pertinent to your school district. For example: "When the new football field is completed, what do you propose to do with the old location?"

As attendees register for the candidate forum, you may hand them an index card on which they may write the question(s) they wish to ask the candidates. A committee of forum planners will go through the questions to weed out duplicates and inappropriate questions. A number of the most relevant questions can then form the oral interview questions for the forum.

Sample questions for the various types of forums can be found on the Texas PTA Advocacy webpage.