

Hosting a PTA Candidates' Forum

An effective way to engage your community and demonstrate your PTA's value is to host a candidates' forum. The forum allows concerned parents and other voters an opportunity to become better informed about their choices for elected representative.

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.

What is a candidates' forum?

A candidates' forum allows candidates running 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:

- 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.

Who should be invited?

Important: All candidates registered with the secretary of state (or other elections certifying body) and vying for an elected 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 opportunity. The IRS can penalize tax-exempt organizations that host a forum that favors or opposes any candidate.

How is a candidates' forum organized?

First, 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.

Then, 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 candidates' forum promoted?

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

You could use the following vehicles to promote the event:

- Newsletters
- School bulletin boards
- Websites
- E-mail
- Fliers
- Posters
- The school marquee
- Newspaper and other media calendar listings
- Lawn signs

Distribute materials to all segments of the community, not just certain organizations that might favor one candidate or another. Encourage the whole community to attend in all of your communications. For more promotional ideas, visit www.pta.org.

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.
- Any debate must have at least two opposing candidates. If only one candidate will be appearing, you should cancel 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 to hand out the materials in an official capacity.

A candidates' 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.