

Grassroots Lobbying Creating a Candidate Forum

Now is the time to take action! Get to know your state representatives while they are campaigning to represent you and your community. Don't wait until after the November elections to make contact, instead, invite each candidate for coffee with the board or host a candidate forum for your community. It's a win/win situation. The school board becomes better acquainted with each candidate and begins to establish a relationship that could prove priceless in the future. In turn, the candidates get valuable time in front of the school board and/or the community. After all, isn't that what every candidate wants, an audience through which to spread their message?

Inviting each House and Senate candidate running within your school district for coffee is a simple and cost effective way to indicate the board's interest in the candidates and also to get to know the candidates. Hosting a candidate forum takes a bit more planning and work, but having the candidates together answering the same questions is an easy way to contrast the candidates in a single setting.

Below are frequently asked questions and answers helpful when planning a candidate forum.

Is a coffee or forum more effective for connecting with our candidates? Both strategies will provide the board with valuable information and, more importantly, convey to your potential state legislators you care what happens at the state level.

Coffee with candidates

The benefits: The board gets quality, one-on-one time with the candidates. Also, your representatives will know that your school board has a vested interest on the goings-on at the Capitol. This connection and understanding is the cornerstone of grassroots lobbying.

The process: Invite legislative candidates via phone or e-mail to a specific location, perhaps one of your schools or a nearby coffee shop. Provide the candidate with dates and times the board can meet; they will appreciate this kind of clarity during their crazy schedule. Also, in your phone message or e-mail, be clear about your intentions—to converse about education and community challenges. The board will want to decide what issues to discuss ahead of time, but otherwise, there is minimal planning.

Note: Remember, when three or more members of the board meet, according to state law you must advertise your meeting to the wider community. [Click here to read CASB's memo on open meeting laws.](#)

Candidate forum

The benefits: Planning a forum can take more work, but you'll reap the rewards. Hosting a candidate forum provides your school board with a one-stop-shop to hear candidate views. It also provides this service to the community, and creates yet another link between your community

and school district. And, a small, but important benefit; you will only need to coordinate board members' schedules with one event, not many meetings.

The process: A forum is a place where ideas and views on a particular issue can be exchanged. The forum can be a formal question and answer session or a casual social event.

What kind of event is best for our community? A formal forum or a casual event?

Holding formal forums allow everyone in the audience the benefit of hearing candidate views and fellow constituents' questions. However, some communities choose to hold more casual forums where those in attendance mingle and hold one-on-one conversations with candidates, with time set aside at some point for each candidate to make a statement. This may work well for smaller "neighborhood" forums or for smaller communities. Meet as a school board to decide what's best for your unique community.

Can we partner with another community group to host a forum?

Absolutely. If your board would like the forum to revolve strictly around P-12 education issues, then the board can host the forum on their own or in conjunction with a neighboring school board if there is overlap of legislative districts. Or, if you wish the forum to have a broader focus, then team up with another organization in your community. Some great groups to team with: chamber of commerce, the local rotary club or other service organization, your local hospital or your local institution of higher education.

When should we hold a forum?

Late August or September. October, though less desirable, can work as long as you hold the forum prior to absentee/mail-in ballots are distributed to voters.

Who should we invite?

Candidates: Invite all candidates for the state House and Senate districts in your community. This may mean you'll be inviting candidates for more than one House and Senate district. If this is the case, be sure in to state in your invitation and on site which candidates are running in which district.

Constituents: As far as the public is concerned, spread the word widely. This is one reason it may be helpful to team up with a local service organization. Invite their membership and use their membership to spread the word. Make simple fliers and post them in appropriate public places, perhaps local stores, churches and public buildings. Send out e-mail blasts to members of local organizations. Write a press release to the community paper.

Should I prepare pre-written questions or leave it open to the audience?

How about both? Preparing questions ahead of time and appointing a person to facilitate the forum will give the host organization(s) more control over the tone and content of the meeting. Also, you can provide candidates with the questions ahead of time, so they can prepare. Most candidates will be amenable for spontaneous questions from the audience. A good way to collect questions on-site is to give each person in attendance a note card to write questions. Collect the note cards and provide them to the facilitator who can then read the questions and omit any that

are inappropriate. This approach gives the audience a chance to participate but helps the host keep the meeting on task.

Leave a half hour at the end of the forum for such questions. Also, when you inform your candidates of the questions they'll be asked, let them know there will be open question/answer at the end.

What about presenting the board's concerns to the candidates?

This is another reason to provide pre-written questions. This is your school board's chance to show they should have a say in state-level decision making. In closing the forum, the board may choose to have a spokesperson thank the candidates and also offer final remarks about your board's chief concerns. Wait until after the candidates have presented their platform before you express that of your board. A smart candidate will research the position of the board prior to the forum, but not all will and you don't want predispose their answers by expressing your priorities/concerns right off the bat. Remember, if you are holding the forum in conjunction with another community entity, make sure you agree on all questions before the forum.

Who should facilitate the forum?

If the school board is hosting the event, any board member can be the facilitator; the board president is a logical choice. If the forum is held jointly among several organizations, decide among the organizations who will facilitate. Perhaps it will be the board president, or the president/chairperson of one of the other organizations. The duties of facilitator can also be shared with a representative from each organization asking the questions pertaining to their organization. It is most important to decide on the facilitator ahead of time so s/he is well prepared to lead the forum in an efficient and orderly manner.

How long should the forum last?

A two-hour window should be sufficient. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for the crowd to arrive and get situated, an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes for formal questions and answers and those from the audience, and another 10 to 15 minutes for those in attendance to mingle a bit before leaving.

What if some candidates are running unopposed?

That's okay. Invite him/her to your forum or arrange a candidate coffee. Making contact with your locally elected legislators should be a regular part of your board duties, election year or not. Between mid-May and December, the legislature is not in session. This means your representatives are back home and easier to contact. Invite your legislators to a ground-breaking ceremony, awards banquet or other event showcasing your district and schools. Get to know your legislators now, before you want or need their help on a legislative issue in the future.

In closing

Regardless of whether your board chooses to invite candidates for coffee or host a forum, either way, take advantage of the campaign season to establish relationships and get to know those who hope to represent your community at the state level. This critical link between you and your future legislators will make it easier and more comfortable for you to reach them when it really counts—during the legislative session.

Extra tips for planning a forum

- *Provide refreshments*
- *Consider providing childcare so more community members can join*
- *If you are providing refreshments and/or childcare, say so in your invitations*
- *Send an op-ed to the newspaper explaining why you're holding the forum and why it's important for the community to join*
- *Send hand-written invitations or make phone calls to specific community leaders you'd like to see attend the forum.*

*This document is part of the Colorado Association of School Board's Grassroots Advocacy Toolkit.
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