

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums

A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Throughout Washington State, Local Units and Councils have hosted candidates' forums. This document provides resources and ideas that have worked in various communities. Please consider this as a starting point and change the outline as needed to meet your community's needs

To plan a forum: Divide it into three main parts.

- Planning
- Content of forum
- Logistics

PLANNING THE FORUM

Build Team

- The work load is not difficult. A single individual can do most of the work, however a team is advised. Ideas can be shared and discussed, and a group will run a less biased forum.
- The group can be several PTA members, several PTAS working together, several councils in a region, or an educational group within your school district. Some PTA's use a coalition that consists of a representative from the teachers union, school board, and PTA. The PTA representative does most of the work, but all ideas are generated and approved by the group.

Develop a Timeline

- Determine the date of the candidate's forum as early as possible. Six months out is not too early. Candidates will get the date on their calendar and you won't have as many problems booking the site.
- An excellent time to hold the candidates forum is a few days before ballots are sent, roughly three weeks before the election.
- See attachment #1 – Timeframe Matrix for Candidates Forum

Develop a Budget

- **Can be very low budget:** Typical expenses include facility use, mailed invitations and mailed thank you notes to candidates, water for candidates, some flyers for public meetings and index cards.
- **Determine who pays** – PTA? Individuals? Coalition?

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums

A Resource for Local Units & Councils

CONTENT OF THE FORUM

Length of Event:

- Typically about 2 hours
- **Legislative Candidates - 1 hour per legislative district** – You may need to invite candidates for more than one district as some districts (and even some schools) will be part of more than one legislative district. **Remember that to be non-partisan, you need to invite all candidates that have registered their campaigns with the PDC. Go to www.pdc.wa.gov Choose “search the database” then pick “legislative” and plug in your legislative district #. Each candidate will be listed, along with the amount of money raised and expended so far.

Sequence of Events:

- See attachment #2 – Suggested Agendas for candidates’ forums:

Questions:

- **Determine who asks the questions**
 - (a) **Small group** – 25 or less: You can easily have more of a conversation at a smaller forum. People can come up to the microphone directly and ask their questions. Because of the small group you don’t need as much control. People prefer asking their own questions, because they can then ask follow-on questions.
 - (b) **Over 25 people** – Larger groups need a more controlled atmosphere. Sometimes people ask the same question over and over because they didn’t like the answer the first time or they weren’t paying attention. And, in a larger audience, conversations can ramble and go off task, making the rest of the group feel they are not getting their concerns addressed. We ask people to write their questions on an index card and turn them into a committee. The committee reviews the questions and then puts them in order of importance. The committee hands the cards to the moderator who asks the questions. Some audience members do not like this format. You will get some complaints that it was too controlled.
- **Format of Questions**

Questions can come from the coalition or from the audience, but every candidate must have the opportunity to answer each question. You will want to rotate who gets to answer first.

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums

A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Moderator

- **Stays neutral.** – The moderator cannot inject any of their views or opinions; they can have their own style, funny, serious etc. But they cannot inject any type of information into the forum except clarity
- **Keeps the forum moving.** They may be asking the questions, or they may be helping the audience to ask questions.
- **Select a Confident public speaker...**and they DO NOT need to know the answers. The moderator is an experienced facilitator, not an expert.

Answers

- **Determine a time limit for answers.** One minute is common. We have started with 2 minutes answers and half way through switched to one minute answers.
- **Time the answers.** Have two people time the answers with a stopwatch. One person can easily lose track of time, the second is an active backup. Our timers give a 30 second warning by raising one finger and making eye contact with the candidate...if they don't make eye contact they will say 30 seconds left. You can also use colored cards. A green card held up could mean 30 seconds left. A red card can mean 10 seconds left.

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums

A Resource for Local Units & Councils

LOGISTICS

Location: Centrally located in your community. An elementary school multi-purpose room is often the right size or a High School commons. The room should hold 100 people comfortably (in case you get a great turn-out) (XYZ PTA's first candidate forum had 7 attendees – the last one had about 100) It is difficult to get people to come if nothing is controversial in your community at the time.

Invitations: Call or email the candidates at least two months before the date of the forum. Try to do this earlier if possible. The candidates will become very booked as the campaign closes and they will really want to attend. They just need to keep their calendar cleared. Once you have emailed or called, then send a formal written invitation. See attachment #4 – Sample Invitation Letter to Candidate

Advertising

- **Local Press:** Immediately notify your local press that you are putting on a candidate's forum. Make sure you include the date, time, location, who is sponsoring the candidates forum and the format for the forum. Make sure that the forum is in the newspapers calendar.
- **School Reader Boards**
- **Other Candidate Forums** -Try to find out who else is running candidate forums...The Chamber of Commerce and the League of Women Voters often host candidate forums. They may be willing to list your forum in their materials.
- **Flyers at school board meetings and other public meetings** – See attachment #3 School Board Candidate Forum Flyer - for an example of a flyer
- **Kid Mail**
- **School District Mailing**
- **Teachers union** – we ask the building union rep to put a flyer up in each of the schools
- **PTA email**

Refreshments If a PTA hosts the site they might be willing to provide refreshments. Refreshments are probably not necessary. Bottled water for each candidate is a nice touch.

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums

A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Room set-up

- **Two microphones** – one for the moderator/or audience members and one for the candidates. It's easiest if you just let the candidates pass the microphone back and forth to each other.
- **Desks in front for candidates** – can be more informal with simply chairs in a semi-circle
- **Name card for each candidate**
- **Signs at the door** stating that this is the candidate's forum.
- **Index cards** for questions (at least 250)
- **Do not allow campaign literature to be distributed on site.**

Thank You's - Send a thank you note to each of the candidates. See attachment #5 – Thank You Letter

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums

A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Attachment #1 – Timeframe Matrix for Candidates Forum

Timeframe:	Action:
Six months out is not too early.	Set date of forum
	Reserve location
	Call candidates and confirm date. All candidates should be able to attend, if not, come up with a different date.
	Notify local press of candidates forum
	Notify school district of candidates forum – (they can then put it into their next district wide mailings)
Two months before forum	Discuss at PTA Council Meeting, Union reps meeting, school board meeting
Six weeks before forum	Send out a PTA press release. Request local press puts forum in local calendar, also request that an article be written a week or two before the forum
	Ask local units to include it in their newsletter or their portion of the school's newsletter. Send an email to all PTA presidents and Legislation chairs. Ask them to talk about the forum at their next PTA meeting have flyers copied for distribution.
	Deliver flyers to school board meetings, chamber meetings etc.
4 weeks before forum	Ask schools to put forum on their reader boards
	Make sure that local press is considering an article and placing the forum in their community calendar
2 weeks before forum	Ask PTA or Union building reps to post flyers at school buildings
	Send an email to all PTA presidents and leg chairs with the flyer attached. Ask them to forward the email, and post the flyer.
1 week before forum	Call on site reservation, make sure that the site is booked and you have everything that is needed.
After Forum	Send thank you notes to all candidates who attended the forum.

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Attachment #2 - Suggested Agendas for Candidate Forums

School Board Candidates Forum Agenda	Legislative Candidates Forum – 1 district	Legislative Candidates Forum – 3 districts
3 positions are open, two candidates for each position	2 positions are open, two Representatives	A total of 16 candidates Senator and 2 rep positions open in two districts – each position has two candidates.
7:00-7:10 Introductions, Explanation on format 7:10-7:30 Each Candidate has 2 minutes to speak on a question they have prepared the answer to 7:30-8:45 Questions 8:45-9:00 Let Candidates mingle and chat with audience	7:00-7:10 Intro & Explanations 7:10-7:30 Each candidate gets three minutes to speak on a prepared question 7:30-8:45 Questions 8:45-9:00 Mingle and Chat	6:00-6:05 Intro and explanation of format 6:05 – 6:45 Questions 6:45-7:00 Mingle and Chat 7:00-7:05 Introductions & overview 7:05-7:45 Questions 7:45-8:00 Mingle and Chat 8:00-8:05 Intro & Explain 8:05-8:45 Questions 8:45-9:00 Mingle & Chat *Note that we didn't leave time for each legislator to talk at the beginning...just not enough time.

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Attachment #3 – School Board Candidates Flyer

Meet the School Board Candidates

On Tuesday, Sept 30, the candidates for the _____ School Board will attend a community forum at _____ Elementary. Each candidate will speak for a few minutes and respond to written questions from the audience. The session will conclude with small group gatherings to meet individual candidates.

The forum is being hosted by the _____ Coalition: _____ Education Association, _____ PTSA Council, and the _____ School Board.

School Board Candidate Forum
Tuesday, Sept. 30th 7-9
_____ **Elementary School Multi-purpose room**

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Attachment #4 – Sample Invitation Letter to Candidates

September 14, 2003

Jane Brown
XYZ PTA
1234 5th Ave. South
Anytown, WA 98075

John Smith
6543 2nd Ave. South
Anytown, WA 98075

Dear Mr. Smith,

The _____ Coalition, consisting of the _____ Council PTSA, _____ Education Association, and _____ School Board of Directors invites you to attend our School Board Candidates Forum on Tuesday, Sept. 30th, from 7-9.

The forum will follow the following format:

1. Each candidate will have two minutes to answer the following question. "Given the sacrifice of time, energy, and money, what compels you to run for the school board?"
2. The audience will write down questions that the moderator will read. Each candidate will have an opportunity to respond to the question, with no longer than two minutes for each response. We will rotate who answers the questions first.
3. The last 20-30 minutes will be reserved as time to meet more informally with the audience.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this event.

Sincerely,

Jane Brown
For the XYZ Coalition

Please RSVP Jane Brown 123.456.7890 or Janebrown@internet.net.

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Attachment #5 – Thank You Letter

October 24, 2003

Jane Brown
XYZ Coalition
1234 5th Ave. West
Anytown, WA 98075

John Smith
24135 SE 16th PL
Sammamish, WA 98075

Dear Mr. Smith,

Thank you for your participation in the Anytown Coalitions Candidate Forum. Your willingness to publicly discuss the issues enable the community to make informed decisions for our school board elections.

Again, thank you for your dedication to kids.

Sincerely,

Jane Brown
For the XYZ Coalition
123.4567
Janebrown@internet.

PTA Hosted Candidates Forums A Resource for Local Units & Councils

Attachment #6 -- Press Release

NEWS RELEASE
September 10, 2006
Contact: xxxx

XYZ PTA To Host Candidate Forum

XYZ PTA will host a candidate forum on xxxxx. The Forum will be held on xxx at xxxx.

The public is welcome to attend. hear from candidates for school board and the Legislature.

###

About Washington State PTA: The Washington State Parent Teacher Association (WSPTA) was founded in 1905. The Washington State PTA is a nonprofit, membership association which seeks to bring together the home, school and community on behalf of all children and youth. It is comprised of over 150,000 members in nearly 1000 local PTA units throughout the state.