

New State Guidelines for School Districts and Elections

Recognizing that public schools have a unique role in informing their communities about bond and levy requests, the state Public Disclosure Commission (PDC) has approved a new set of guidelines clarifying permitted and prohibited activities for school districts in elections.

The guidelines were approved in late August following several months of discussions between the school community, including WSSDA, and PDC staff. The discussions were initiated earlier this year after the PDC inserted school districts into a broad set of guidelines covering all local government entities.

The new guidelines include a set of basic principles relating to school districts and ballot measure elections. These principles note that while state law prohibits the use of public facilities to support or oppose a candidate or ballot proposition, school districts are authorized to prepare and distribute information to the general public about their programs and operations, including the needs faced by a district and its students.

One of the most significant principles says school districts may distribute only one district-wide fact sheet publication relating to a bond or levy request, unless the district is prepared to show that it traditionally uses more than one district-wide mailing to engage the community in major policy issues. During discussions on this issue, the PDC said its "one fact sheet" rule is long standing, while education participants showed that on major issues like graduation requirements or attendance boundaries, communities expect more thorough communication from districts, and that ballot measures should not be treated differently.

Some of the other principles state that:

- School districts are charged with education and instilling civic virtue.
- School directors are free to support school district ballot issues and engage in other political activities as long as such activities do not make use of district facilities, time or resources and do not either pressure or condone employees' use of district facilities, time or resources to support school district ballot issues.
- Supervisory school personnel have a duty to know, apply, and communicate to their staffs the difference between acceptable information activities and inappropriate promotional activities in support of district ballot measures.
- School district employees do not forfeit their rights to engage in political activity because of their employment.

The document includes a series of specific guidelines on permitted and prohibited activities, arranged according to the people, activities and resources which are affected. One section covers superintendents, principals, school boards and directors, students, PTSA's, teachers or other employees, and union representatives. The other

section lists activities and resources, including equipment and supplies, meeting facilities, lists, voting information, publications, surveys and research, and technology (e.g., websites and e-mails).

The guidelines document is available on the PDC website at www.pdc.wa.gov.