



## Organizing a Local Legislative or Candidates Forum

1. **Form a committee.**
2. **Determine whether PTA will sponsor the forum alone** or with another nonpartisan organization, such as the League of Women Voters.
3. **Set the date, and obtain a facility** that is centrally located, if possible. If it will accommodate the number of candidates, a school district auditorium is an excellent location, and in most cases, already set up.
4. **Draft invitations to legislators/candidates.** Be sure to include:
  - a) Complete information on date, time, and place;
  - b) Guidelines and ground rules for the forum (e.g., there will be only written questions, amount of time allowed for legislator/candidates' responses; topics of questions; forum format (including time for opening and closing statements, candidate order for statements and answers, etc.); rules prohibiting campaign literature distribution in the forum room;
  - c) Name, address, telephone number and e-mail address of forum committee's contact person;
  - d) Due date for the legislator/candidate to respond.
5. **Legislator/Candidate schedules are often hectic.** They may be contacted by many organizations with requests for information, personal appearances, and/or forums. Establishing a personal connection by calling all legislators/candidates to inform them about the forum, to extend an initial invitation, and to advise them to look for a more formal invitation in the mail can facilitate both the process of organizing the forum and communicating with the legislators/candidates.
6. **Obtain local office addresses of all legislators and/or official candidates,** and send invitations by certified mail with a return receipt requested. The signed, returned receipts should be kept on file.
7. **Determine physical arrangements:**
  - a) Provide adequate accessible seating for attendees.
  - b) Seating for legislators/candidates should be in the form of a head table, preferably elevated so they are visible to the audience. Seating assignments should be done by lottery with each legislator/candidate drawing a seat number prior to the

beginning of the forum. The table should also be draped and water provided for legislators/candidates and moderator.

c) The moderator is the forum facilitator and may either stand at a podium or may be seated at the table with the legislators/candidates. If the former, the moderator should be provided with a chair. If the latter, the moderator must be seated in a location that allows for eye contact with all legislators/candidates and control over the forum process and decorum.

d) Provide an adequate sound system with microphones available to rotate among the legislators/candidates, with a separate microphone for the moderator.

e) Provide a table for question sorters toward the front of the room.

#### **8. Identify volunteer responsibilities:**

a) Volunteers from PTA and co-sponsoring organizations that organize and/or staff the forum should have no personal ties to any legislator or candidacy, and shall not have publicly expressed support or opposition to any of the legislators/candidates.

b) The forum committee should arrange for the following: greeters for both legislators/candidates and attendees; hospitality; person to open the forum and lead the Pledge of Allegiance – may be the moderator or president of the sponsoring organization(s).

c) Secure a neutral moderator. Consider requesting a respected political or education editor/reporter from the local media. The moderator or his/her organization cannot have casually or formally endorsed any of the legislators/candidates.

d) Question Sorters – Enlist PTA representatives with no personal ties to any legislator/candidate.

e) Timers – one to keep track of time, and one to hold up signs to signal legislators/candidates.

f) Two or three volunteers to hand out blank index cards, pick up questions and deliver them to the sorters.

#### **9. On the day of the forum:**

a) As attendees enter ushers should provide blank index cards on which attendees may write questions for the legislators/candidates. Each index card should be used for only one question.

b) Begin with Pledge of Allegiance, welcome, and a statement of the nonpartisan policies of the sponsoring groups.

c) Moderator should go over the basic forum guidelines and procedures so the audience will understand them and know what to expect. The moderator will also include the following information:

- i. The order of questions will be rotated among the legislators/candidates in random order.
- ii. Whether all questions will be in writing or if questions from attendees will be permitted.
- iii. All questions will be screened for relevance, to avoid duplication, and to assure adherence to the guidelines and ground rules. Personal questions or attacks on any legislator/candidate will not be acknowledged.
- iv. If a question is directed to a specific legislator/candidate, it must be issue-focused. The legislator/candidate will have a set amount of time to respond. All other legislators/candidates may have an opportunity to respond, if they so desire.
- v. If a question is directed to all legislators/candidates, each will have between one and two minutes to respond.

d) Timers should hold up signs to signal speakers:

- i. Green: start
- ii. Yellow: 15 seconds left
- iii. Red: stop

e) Begin forum. While legislators/candidates are giving their opening statements, screeners can begin sorting questions to be asked of the legislators/candidates. If questions have been received through outreach efforts prior to the forum, they should be included in the mix. After the opening statements, the moderator asks the questions received from the question sorters. (Note: In the event attendance is small at the beginning of the forum, the moderator should have a few questions in hand that were collected prior to the forum.)

f) Moderator or other designee should close and thank co-sponsors, if applicable, and everyone in the forum audience for attending, reminding them of the election date and encouraging them to study the legislators/candidates and cast their votes.

#### **10. Follow-up after the forum is held:**

- a) Send a thank you note to legislators/candidates and the moderator for attending the forum.
- b) Prepare an article about the forum for your PTA newsletter. Make sure to list all legislators/candidates that attended and those that did not. This, in itself, sends a message.