

# This is a Great Time to Organize Candidate Forums, Here's How ...



The 2017-18 Legislative Session is over and campaign/election season has begun. Half of the state Senate and all state Assembly seats are up for reelection this fall. Your school district can play an active role in the election (and provide an important community service!) by hosting a candidate forum. A forum is a great way to engage your community around an upcoming election, to build support for the issues that matter to your school district, and to learn more about the candidates running to represent you.

## Plan Ahead

Pick a time and date to host your forum. Avoid religious or government holidays, dates when other community functions are scheduled, and business hours. For the site, a school building is ideal, but make sure you have adequate seating.

## Invite Candidates

Legislative district boundaries typically determine which candidates to invite and whether it makes sense to partner with neighboring school districts. Send an invitation to the candidates well before the planned event and follow up with a phone call. Candidate contact information is available on the Wisconsin Elections Commission website at

elections.wi.gov. Since this would be a campaign-related event, send invites to incumbents' campaign or home addresses rather than their capitol offices. The earlier you schedule your candidate forum, the better. Candidate's schedules typically get more crowded the closer you get to the date of the primary or election.

## Choose a Format

There are numerous ways to structure a candidate forum including:

- Candidates give prepared remarks, and attendees ask follow-up questions from microphones in the audience.
- Candidates are asked prepared questions on themes important to public education and your community. See below for ideas from WASB on questions.
- Candidates are asked questions that the audience submits on index cards. At the end, candidates provide closing statements, with an equal amount of time given to each candidate.

In any format, you'll need a moderator to introduce the candidates, start the dialogue, keep the discussion moving, and screen the questions submitted by audience members if that is the method you select. Ask a well-known, nonpartisan

member of your community to serve in this role — a school administrator, school board president or a local media person are common examples.

## Generate Interest

Consider partnering with neighboring school districts. Working together with other districts allows you to reach more people and gain more exposure. Inform the local media about the forum as well as any parent, teacher or other civic groups that may be interested in attending.

Spread the word utilizing newsletters, social media, local newspapers and/or local television or radio outlets. The WASB can also help promote your event.

Send a media advisory three to five days in advance. Consider allocating central, unobstructed space close to electrical outlets for camera crews and reporters to cover your event.

## Keep it Fair and Nonpartisan

As a trusted, nonpartisan voice in the community, your school board and school district is uniquely suited to host a candidate forum. Make sure all major-party candidates in that election are invited. Make a thorough and good faith effort to ensure the participation of at least two candidates for a specific office

## Get Updates on Legislative Activities at WASB Summer Conferences

On Friday, July 13, the WASB will be hosting a special School Safety Seminar in Green Bay. One of the featured sessions will be provided by Glenn Rehberg, the acting director for the Office of School Safety at the Department of Justice. He'll be joining us talk about the state's new school safety grants and legal requirements. Attendees will have the opportunity ask him questions and get an update on the grant process. The next day, on Saturday, July 14,

the WASB will be hosting the traditional Summer Leadership Institute which will include a legislative update. You'll have the chance to get a report on the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding and where its work is headed as well as the most current information on all things affecting K-12 public education. The Leadership Institute features tracks for both new and experienced school board members so there's something for everyone. □

but you may proceed with a forum if only one candidate accepts.

If only one candidate attends, make clear to attendees and in your advertising that other candidates or parties were invited to participate, naming names and giving reasons for nonparticipation, quoting invitees. If no reason is given for nonparticipation, then state that. This avoids the impression that you are taking a partisan stance by omission.

### ■ Take Notes

During the forum, make note of the candidates' positions and any commitments they provide. This will be useful in future communications and allow you to better hold them accountable for their votes.

### ■ Follow Up

Send thank you letters to the participating candidates, any school district staff who assisted in making the arrangements, the moderator, timer, and any other volunteers. These are sample candidate forum questions:

1. What do you see as the greatest challenges facing our public schools?
2. What is your view of public schools

overall? What is your view of public schools in your community (or legislative district)?

3. In your view, does the current school funding formula adequately support the state's public schools? If not, what changes might you propose?
4. Do you support allowing school districts to receive annual increases in funding that enable them to keep pace with inflation (CPI)? If yes, why? If no, why not?
5. Should increases in funding for school districts come from increasing state per-pupil categorical aid, increasing per-pupil revenue limits, increasing state general equalization aid, or a combination of these sources?
6. Will you support eliminating state-imposed revenue limits on public school districts or at least allowing annual per-pupil adjustments to revenue limits that are aligned with inflation (CPI)?
7. Do you support local school board control of K-12 education? Are there exceptions where you feel a state or federal role is appropriate?
8. Do you support restrictions on when school district referendums may be held?

9. What do you see as some of the local issues and challenges for your school district? If elected, how would you help us to improve the situation?

10. What can be done to better provide appropriate mental health treatment for Wisconsin's school-age youth? Will you support funding or other support for school-based mental health services?
11. Do you support continued expansion of the voucher program that provides taxpayer-funded vouchers to students who attend private and religious schools? Do you support requiring eligibility for voucher programs to be based on family income or do you support eliminating income eligibility limits?
12. Should the state provide taxpayer-funded vouchers for students in special education to attend religious and private schools, regardless of family income?
13. Will you support requiring property tax bills to include the dollar amount of state aid deducted from that district to fund vouchers for pupils who attend private schools?
14. What will be your top three priorities as a legislator next year? □

## NEW THIS FALL: Advocacy Workshops to replace Legislative Advocacy Conference

**W**e're revamping our advocacy outreach and training for school board members based on membership feedback solicited at 2017 WASB Fall Regional Meetings. A strong majority of those responding indicated they would prefer to attend a regional workshop in addition to or in place of the annual November Legislative Advocacy Conference held in recent years in Stevens Point.

As a result, on a trial basis this fall, the GR staff will hold four, two-hour, regional advocacy workshops in November.

### ■ Save a date!

- Nov. 8 at CESA 10

- Nov. 13 at CESA 4
- Nov. 14 at CESA 6
- Nov. 15 at CESA 8

These workshops will be held in the evening at various CESA offices around the state. They will start with a brief meal followed by an interactive presentation. Among the likely topics will be how the fall election will shape K-12 education policy and the WASB's legislative agenda, and how school board members can help advance a pro-K-12 legislative agenda.

The sessions will also feature legislative advocacy training, with tips on how to build relationships with legislators, how to communi-

cate effectively with legislators and how to advocate on the state budget. Our goal is to help school board members become better advocates for the districts and children as well as more effective participants in both the WASB Day at the Capitol in mid-March and public hearings on the state budget that will follow shortly thereafter in April of next year.

In the fall of 2019, the GR staff will return to holding a one-day, fall Legislative Advocacy Conference in a centralized location as in the past. The plan is to hold workshops in the even-numbered years and a conference in odd-numbered years. □