

Staff Participation in the Referendum

The following Q & A should help you understand your role as a district staff member during the election season. Note that you can apply the same rules to the school board election.

*General rules to remember: If you are acting in the capacity of a district staff member, you **should not** be advocating for or against the referendum (or for or against a school board candidate), but you can provide factual information. If you are on your own time and acting as a private citizen, you **can** advocate in any manner you wish.*

Q. What is the law governing information about the referendum?

- A.** Districts must provide information about the campaign in a neutral manner. These publications must not promote a vote for or against the issue. School boards may expend a reasonable amount of funds to educate voters of the facts pertinent to the ballot question. It is the district's job to educate voters with the facts. It is the right of citizen and employee groups to advocate for or against.

Q. What may I tell students or send home with students? What if students ask about the levies in class?

- A.** You *may* provide information that is factual, such as when and where the election is being held and what the referendum is for. The district will provide factual information you can share. You *may not* campaign to vote "yes" or "no" while working in your official capacity as an employee (e.g., teachers at conferences, when instructing or when coaching). You *may* campaign to vote "yes" or "no" when on your own time as a private citizen.

Discussion regarding the referendum election is not appropriate for the classroom unless it is related to the curriculum – for example, related to discussion of citizen rights to vote, political process, etc., and/or does not attempt to persuade individuals how to vote on the issue.

Q. What may I say in classroom newsletters or tell parents at open houses or conferences or via e-mail, etc.?

- A.** See question above. Remember the underlying principle: school districts *may not* expend school district funds to support a particular vote on a proposition. Therefore, newsletters or any official communication from the school may provide only factual information about the levy but not take a position of support or opposition.

Q. What are appropriate ways to share factual information about the referendum?

- A.** If you want to distribute any district referendum materials or provide other factual information, you can do so many ways including:
- Backpacks
 - Newsletters
 - Emails and e-newsletters
 - School websites (a link to the district referendum page ensures consistent information)
 - Open houses
 - Events

- Parent-teacher conferences

Q. What if a community member or parent confronts me about the information we are providing?

- A.** We are sometimes criticized for providing *any* information, including that which is legal and which we are obligated to provide. Refer any concerns to the superintendent's office.

Q. May I use school e-mail as it relates to the levy referendum?

- A.** Staff should not use district e-mail in any way that relates to campaigning for the levy, but staff can provide factual information regarding the levy using district email. If staff members wish to inform parents and the public regarding the facts surrounding the referendum, the best source of information is what is available on the district web page.

Q. What can I use school district equipment for?

- A.** You *may* use interschool mail, video equipment, copy machines, etc., to provide factual information regarding many district issues, including its financial condition and referendum facts. You *may not* use school equipment to "get out the vote" or to provide reasons why people should vote yes or no.

Q. When and where may I wear buttons, stickers, t-shirts, etc.?

- A.** You can wear whatever you'd like when you are off duty. You can always display generic positive messages about the school district (e.g. "We Love Our Schools"). While you have a First Amendment right to wear buttons, stickers, t-shirts, etc., that say "Vote Yes" or "Vote No" at any time, if you are in a position of authority that right is limited. As public employees, we may not use our position to influence the outcome of an election, so if you are in a position of authority over students, parents or other staff, you need to consider the influence you have and whether wearing advocacy items is appropriate. If you do decide that it is appropriate to wear a button, sticker or t-shirt regarding the referendum wear a button you may do so as long as it does not cause a disruption. In addition no buttons or "other political insignia" can be worn on Election Day within 100 feet of a polling place. See Minn. Stat. Section 211B.11

Q. Do the rules change when I am off-site (e.g., at a coffee shop or out in public)?

- A.** Yes. While staff members may not encourage a "yes" vote on school premises during the contract day, staff members and school board members may certainly, in their personal capacity, engage in political activities as they wish.

Q. Can I write letters to the editors of newspapers?

- A.** Yes. You may always express your personal opinion on such matters as classroom space or district needs. While a staff member may identify himself or herself as a staff member of the school district, he or she should also make it clear that the letter expresses his or her own personal opinion. It should not be written on school district stationery. If it is communicated via e-mail, the district e-mail system should not be used, nor should it come from a school computer.

Q. May I post a sign in my yard?

- A.** Yes.

Q. Am I allowed to make financial contributions to and/or participate in events sponsored by the citizen committee supporting the levy referendum?

A. Yes.

Q. May I volunteer to work on phone banks or go door-to-door with literature?

A. Yes, so long as the volunteer activity does not occur during the contract day.

Q. What can schools say in parent newsletters?

A. School newsletters can provide information about the election such as where and when it is held and other factual information about the school district and levy questions.

Q. May employee organizations send a letter or postcard to parents urging “yes” votes?

A. Yes. Employee organizations are separate entities and may campaign for or against the referendum. Employee organizations may also donate money to a “yes” campaign. Again, no volunteer activity can occur during the contract day.

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