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Changing Guidance for School Districts During Election Information Campaigns

External Email

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Shannon Parthemer. I am the Director of Communications for Lake Washington School District in King County. Lake Washington School District has over 30,000 students in 56 schools. We employ more than 4,900 people. We are the second-largest school district in the state of Washington.

I have been a K-12 school communications professional for the past 19 years. This position has required me to constantly change and evolve my practice to best meet the needs of our students, employees and community.

As you consider changing guidance for school districts during election information campaigns, I would like for you to consider the following three things: 1) The guidance must reflect modern information consumption. 2) Electronic media provides equitable access to information at a lower cost to taxpayers. 3) Updated guidance should balance regulation and public information.

The guidance developed 20 years ago does not adequately address the complexities of today's communications landscape. Existing guidance primarily focuses on traditional fact sheets, while research shows that most Americans no longer consume information in that format. Research also indicates that modern communication requires dynamic and engaging methods. Best practices for social media include using photos and real-life stories to capture and maintain the audience's attention. We know audience attention spans are short, and information must be presented in bite-sized, accessible pieces. Frequent messaging is critical due to social media platforms' methods of delivering posts to individual users. Repetition is not merely appropriate; it is necessary for conveying important information.

Like many others in our state, our community no longer has a local newspaper. Social media is a critical tool that districts use to reach diverse audiences and inform the community about how tax dollars are spent. Social media and websites translate into many languages, which is critical for school districts that serve growing numbers of people who do not read English. It's an accessible, cost-effective, and equitable way to engage with residents who may not have children in public schools. Paid digital media allows districts to distribute information to a defined geographic area at a lower cost than traditional print media. School districts also need the opportunity to correct misinformation about their measures so that the community has access to accurate information about ballot measures.

While the need to regulate public agencies during elections is understood, balancing regulation and districts' obligation to inform the community about students' needs and challenges is necessary. Community members have the expectation and the right to know the rationale behind funding measures on the ballot and the expected outcomes for students. We are aware of recent investigations of other school districts that have extended beyond the scope of citizen complaints, resulting in extensive investigations into communication methods that local citizens do not view as excessive or unlawful. The staff time necessary to respond to these investigations diverts staff away from duties that serve the local community.

We ask that the PDC collaborate with communications professionals, consider research findings, and engage with stakeholders to update guidelines that reflect current communication realities, public information needs and the practices of information consumers.

Updated guidance should acknowledge the realities of modern communication and ensure school districts can effectively inform the community about students' needs and funding measures while complying with the law.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Shannon Parthemer, APR
Director of Communications
Lake Washington School District

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