

Minneapolis Public Schools staff guide to the referendum

The Minneapolis Public Schools Board of Education approved the 2018 MPS Strong Referendum, a set of two school funding questions on the November 6, 2018 ballot. Use this guide to learn more about your role as a district staff member during election season. The same rules apply to the school board election. For more information, visit the referendum webpage at: www.mpls.k12.mn.us/referendum.

Remember, if you are acting in the capacity of a district staff member, you cannot advocate 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 how we provide information about the referendum?

A. Districts must provide information about the referendum 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 a ballot measure or candidates.

Q. What may I tell students or send home with students? What if students ask about the levy 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 webpage has a wide range of 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" 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 on how to vote on the issue.

Q. What may I say in classroom newsletters/emails or tell parents at open houses/conferences?

A. Newsletters or any official communication from the school may provide only factual information about the referendum but cannot 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 materials produced by the MPS Communications Department or provide other factual information from the district's referendum website, you can do so many ways including:

- Backpack flyers
- Newsletters
- Emails and e-newsletters
- School websites
- Open houses
- Events
- Parent-teacher conferences
- School Messenger calls home

Q. May I use school email as it relates to the referendum?

A. Staff should not use district email in any way that relates to campaigning for the referendum, but staff can provide factual information regarding the levy using district email.

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. 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.

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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 referendum?

A. Yes.

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

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

Q. May employee groups (like unions) send a letter or postcard to parents urging “yes” votes?

A. Yes. Employee groups are separate entities and may campaign for or against the levy referendum. Employee groups may also donate money to a “yes” campaign.

Q. What if I have more questions about my role as a staff member?

A. If in doubt about whether your actions with regard to the referendum are appropriate, consult with your building principal, the legal department at 668-0480, or the communications office at answers@mpls.k12.mn.us.