

Guide to Student-Led Candidate Town Halls

BY LAIBA EFFENDI, EDUCATEUS YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD



Last spring, a fellow student and I organized a town hall for candidates running for school board within our district. Through this, 40+ students were able to ask all town hall candidates about the issues that ACTUALLY mattered to them and share it with other adults and students in the district.

Now, with the help of this guide, I hope to help you host a students-only town hall with the candidates running for school board in your own school district. Even more, I hope that these tips can allow you to maximize the impact of your town hall, so that students finally have a real say in the people who oversee our education!

But first:

What is a candidate town hall?

This is a student-led initiative to organize and host an event with school board candidates and student attendees, so students can:

- Directly ask candidates questions about their policies.
- Clarify misinformation or inconsistencies in candidates' public stances.
- Learn how school board decisions actually impact students
- Share what they learn with their classmates, families and communities outside of school.

The goal is to help students become a more powerful force in shaping our own education, even those students who are too young to vote.

Why should you host a town hall?

School boards play a huge role in shaping our lives as students on both a small and large scale. Members are responsible for:

- selecting the school district's leadership (like the superintendent) and evaluating their performance
- allocating funds for schools, materials, and programs
- choosing what is taught in our schools
- zoning/which students can attend which schools

...as well as so much more. This makes it SUPER important that the people most affected by school board policies (students!!) get to choose who is representing them.

According to the National School Board Association, school board elections normally have a 5-10% turnout rate. That's incredibly low. **Just a small increase in student engagement in school board elections could change who gets elected to these crucial positions.** Even if you're not old enough to vote yet, students can heavily influence their friends who can, as well as all kinds of adults that we know.

Because I'm a first-generation student, my parents were never very familiar with school board elections. Throughout high school, I never encouraged them to vote either as I wasn't really sure which candidates I needed to support. This changed once I grew more involved in student government inside of my district. I was able to talk to my family and friends (who then spoke to their families and friends) about candidates and the election cycle. We couldn't vote, but our active involvement helped the adults around us make an informed vote.

As a high school student, you have the power to bring together various pillars of your community to advocate for the educational environment best for YOU.

However, in order to help inform other people in their community, you (and other students in general) need to have a thorough and accurate understanding of the election process, policies, and candidate stances themselves first.

Which leads us to the big question:

How DO students actually determine which candidates will support our educational needs?

Hosting a town hall can help with this in a number of ways:

1. In the process of hosting your town hall, you will learn about policy work, communication, and your specific school district.
2. Students involved in organizing and student attendees will have a direct answer to their MOST pressing questions from every single Board candidate.
3. With strategic research and a list of guided questions (explained later in the article) you can make sure students who aren't aware of specific issues leave the event with a greater understanding of how their school board impacts them directly.
4. Finally, by sharing information gained during the town hall to all students and parents in your district you can ensure that the crucial, transparent information you discover is made accessible to everyone.

On a more personal note...

This process made me so much more secure and confident in my organizing and research abilities! I didn't get the hang of researching candidate backgrounds or navigating our district policy site right away, and this unfamiliarity taught me how to reach out when I needed help. My librarian helped me understand where to find specific policies and what different codes meant and my English teachers were kind enough to discuss relevant policies with me. I learned how to network with candidates and students, and how to pitch my idea to many groups despite being a total stranger to them. Finally, moderating our town hall taught me SO SO much about organizing and respectfully demanding that both candidates and students respect the rules we had implemented.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE + tips!!

It's a good idea to give yourself one to three months before your school board election date to begin organizing. An overall breakdown of project implementation would look something like this:

Step 1:

Research Stakeholders and Reach Out:

WHO can give your project more legitimacy?

Organizing, outreach, and follow up can be time consuming—attempts to do it all on your own will burn you out.

When implementing this in my own district, my project partner and I chose to contact our school principals, the coordinators of our district leadership group, my high school librarian, and history teachers at both of our schools.

They all helped out in different ways:

- My principal shared information about the town hall as a school announcement.
- Our district leadership coordinators offered recommendations for spaces and granted us permission to survey students within the leadership group for questions.
- My librarian helped me understand how to navigate our district policy page and offered to contact district offices to ensure we wouldn't get in trouble with administration for posing specific questions.
- Our history teachers offered to provide extra credit for students who actively participated in the town hall and could provide proof.

However, it's important to remember that not everyone will be helpful, or helpful in the ways that you need them to be. I assumed that our district coordinators and principals would be much more involved than they actually were. This is a quick reminder that it's okay to continue your work even if your administration isn't very supportive. **At the bottom line, you only need to ensure that your board candidates agree and that students are aware and incentivized to attend.**

Specific groups you can look to:

- **Student activists & student-led organizations** → to share information with other students or build a team (help with planning, recording the town hall, moderating etc.)
- **PTO or other parent organization** → Ensure that voting adults learn about any information you discuss during the town hall
- **Principals, administrator, librarians**→ Help with sharing information to helpful stakeholders and/or provide legitimacy to your work with their support
- **Teachers** → May provide extra credit to students for attendance/submitting questions or share the opportunity with other students ([sample extra credit request email](#))

Reach out! Draft a mission statement -- who you are, what you hope to do, and why it's important -- and share it with all possible stakeholders. Then, ask them to support you in the ways they are able to. The more support you have, the more likely it is that candidates will agree to interview! ([Sample mission statement](#))

Step 2:

Finding a Venue

- **Accessibility:** When choosing a venue, try to ensure it is physically accessible for students with mobility challenges and, if possible, easily reachable by public transportation for students who may not have cars.
- **Face-to-Face vs. Virtual:** A good place to start is **planning with the intention of an in-person town hall because it makes the student-candidate interactions a lot more authentic.** Students can ask their questions to candidates directly instead of having to add them to a question bank. Even more, there's always the extra assurance of knowing that candidate responses are genuine because you speak with them in real time and know that their answers really are their own.
- However, if you're not able to find a physical space, you can resort to an online town hall over Zoom or Google Meets. These spaces are also very helpful when it comes to recording your town hall as they offer features such as a transcript, meeting summary, and meeting recording.
- **Finding a space:** You want to start by looking for spaces that are low to no cost. You can try looking within your own school – asking a few months in advance makes this more likely to work. Explain your project to your principal and request to use an **extra classroom, your school library, or school auditorium** as a town hall space. If they agree, you can work with them to find a date. If there isn't an area available on your school campus, try looking toward district owned spaces (such as **your district's administration building**) or public spaces. Possibly reach out to your **local library or a career preparation center** in your area by phone or email and request to use their space within the month that you plan to host. The worst they can say is no. [[link to sample email](#)]

In our case, we contacted our districts Career and Technical Center as they usually have lots of rooms reserved for district events. They were on board at first, but cancelled later as they were no longer comfortable hosting a fully student organized event. This goes to show that there will be setbacks! Still, there are always multiple solutions. If it's harder to reserve spaces as students, try to email your school counselors or principal and ask if there are alternative spaces they can help you reserve.

Inviting Candidates and Participants

Candidates: Reaching out to candidates is surprisingly straightforward. Candidates are looking and excited for opportunities to speak about their campaign and reach new audiences. You can send them an email explaining who you are, what you want to do, and ask for their availability during the date you hope to host your town hall. [\[It could look something like this:\]](#)

If a candidate doesn't answer, make sure to follow up! If they do, ask them if they'd be willing to encourage their opponents to attend to ensure that they have a productive conversation.

Participants: You can't have a town hall without participants. You can advertise this opportunity in a few ways. Create flyers and post them around your school. Ask principals and teachers to help promote your event. Send it to your PTO members so that they can share it. If you have school announcements, ask to share your event on the loudspeaker. Also, send your advert to different organizations within your district if you'd like to reach an even broader audience.

It's also important to **understand what students hope to gain** from the town hall. You can prepare a Google Form for students to submit possible questions, and then link it on your flyers through QR code. This way, you can find the most common/popular questions.

BONUS TIP: Try creating "buckets" or specific categories for students to ask questions about. For example, you could ask if they had questions regarding nutrition, curriculum, mental health, scheduling, finances, etc. This will make them easier to sort.

Step 3:

Organizing the Actual Event

- **Important Roles.** During the town hall you will need at least two mediators in charge of asking questions, keeping candidates within time, and directing the event.
- You will also need to **find a historian** – this is someone or something that will record the contents of the entire session. Consider having a camera that records the town hall and an individual taking note of important points as well.
- If the event is in-person, it's helpful to have extra individuals around the room helping with technical issues or any other needs participants may have.
- **Food:** Having snacks or refreshments might incentivize people to attend.
- **Pamphlets:** It's helpful to have pamphlets with questions that students (or adults if there are adult attendees) can ask based on the questions submitted by individuals who RSVP'd. Have around 10 questions. [[Here's a list of sample questions](#)]

Preparing for Difficult Moments:

- **Have a plan for how the moderator will politely redirect a candidate who dodges a question.** [[see examples of polite but direct statements the moderator can use](#)]
- **Set clear 'community agreements' for respectful dialogue at the start of the event.**
 - Have handouts with these guidelines or on a screen visible to everyone in the room.
[[example of community agreement](#)]
- **Have a plan for addressing members who might be disruptive.**
 - Make it clear that disruptive individuals will be asked to leave after their first warning. You can ask security personnel or staff members to help with this process.

Step 4:

Host the Town Hall!

This is the time you have to just focus on having the best town hall you can have. Tie up any loose ends and make sure you and your team are prepared. [[You can use this town hall checklist to make sure you're prepared.](#)] **Remember to have different individuals recording and/or taking pictures for advertisement later.**

Step 5:

Share what you found.

- **Take the transcript of your town hall and turn it into an accurate but digestible summary article.** You can link this article (and a recording of the town hall) on a pamphlet for others to view. You can also ask your principal or superintendent team to publish it in any student and parents newsletters that they have. Send it to your PTO! [[Here's a sample flyer and article](#)].
- **Make a digital toolkit!** It might be easier to share what you learned through pre-made, shareable/repostable content like:
 - 1-2 powerful quote graphics from candidates
 - A 30 second video clip of the most impactful moment
 - A clear 'call to action' graphic with voting information

Share this material on your social media accounts, and ask the adults you know to share it on Facebook where other parents are likely to see it.

Step 6:

Follow through! Continue to ensure that individuals can access and understand the findings of your town hall. Encourage students who found this useful to share it with their parents and make an educated voting decision. **Most importantly, encourage each person to go VOTE.** You can provide voting location links and other information alongside your town hall summary to ensure accessibility. This is the final stretch of your candidate town hall work.

Final thoughts

Our virtual session ended up with 200+ students and all 7 of our board candidates in attendance. While we don't have a statistical measure of how our town hall impacted voter turnout, the impact it made in student interest in our school board was incredibly clear.

At my school specifically, underclassmen in our student council volunteered to host the event again the following year. On a district level, we had student engagement in policy grow, with students attending a board meeting to petition against discrepancies in students' gpa-based ranking (a lot of them were students who had attended the town hall!).

Overall, I hope that this continued tradition will change students' mindsets to approach local elections with determination and purpose instead of apathy or hopelessness. :)

To make it even easier, the team at EducateUS is here to help! Just reach out to organizing@educateusaction.org to tell us about your town hall plans and how we can support you. If you reach out, you could get up to \$100 toward flyers, refreshments, or anything else you need to make your student-led candidate town hall a success.

Start becoming a powerful force in shaping your own education today!