

WINNING SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS 2026



Pre Academy Handouts

Organizers must distinguish between worksite and local political campaigns, with school board elections having a significant impact on public school employees. To win, they need to develop strong leaders and build relationships with external groups, while also mobilizing voters and finding candidates, using member engagement plans, and exploring best practices.

The NEA Center for Organizing and Affiliate Support in partnership with the NEA Campaigns and Elections department created a training designed to build participants' understanding of political campaigns that increases the power and organizing capacity of their locals and community. Participants will deepen their understanding of campaign planning, candidate recruitment, coalition building, PAC fundraising, member engagement, voter contact, and messaging.

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READ ME FIRST: Welcome to NEA's Winning School Board Elections Academy. This is an in-person event. It is required that you complete all the tasks in this pre-attendance module as outlined below before you arrive. It is highly recommended that you download the files in this module to the device that you will be using at the event before you arrive, in case we experience low connectivity in our training room. If you prefer paper to work with, you will need to download and print those files before you arrive. Why Pre-Academy Assignments? The resources compiled here are short, relevant, and intended to help you shift from the day-to-day cognitive load of work to the thinking you will use as a learner at the academy. It should take no longer than 3 hours to complete these.

Task 1 – Review Community Agreements: Estimated Time to Complete: 20 Minutes

There are two pieces to this. You will navigate to the module named "Community Agreements" in the left-hand navigation pane of the course and complete that online component. This will take about 10 minutes to complete. AND there is a fillable PDF file in this module that you will need to download and save to your own device. Please read the Community Agreements and answer the three questions on that fillable form. This should take about 10 minutes. We will be using these for an activity very early on Day 1.

Task 2 – Prepare for Panel: Estimated Time to Complete: 30 Minutes

We will be joined by staff and leaders from around the country, in-person and via zoom that have school board lessons to share. Please read the panel articles in the document named "Panel Links," to understand more about their stories and think about what you would want to ask them. This is a fillable PDF form, and you will need to download it to your device before you complete it. We will be using this on Day 1.

Task 3 – Complete Vote Goal Module

We will use a calculation on Day 1 to determine what your actual VOTE GOAL should be for your campaign. Go to the left-hand navigation of this course and complete the module named "VOTE GOAL". Please complete this before attending. We will revisit this during our time together.

Task 4 – Review Campaign Plan Template: Estimated Time to Complete: 30 Minutes

We will be using the fillable PDF form, “Campaign Template” throughout our time together. This document is in this module and also in the Participant Handouts Module. You will need to download and save it to your device and have it available as we go through different skills workshops. Before ARRIVING, you will need to have a local association in mind that you would want to run a school board election in. If you don’t have assigned locals or elections upcoming, choose a local school district in your state that is interesting to you.

Task 5 – Review Scenario: Estimated Time to Complete: 20 Minutes

Review the Campaign Scenario for the Recruitment & Recommendation Exercise. This will be used in small groups, and it will be difficult to work with your group if you have not read the material before the exercise. We will be using this on Day 1.

Task 6 - Create a free Canva Account: 30 Minutes

If you don’t have one already at canva.com Some of you will be using Canva on Day 3 to create a social media post. If you need assistance on how to create a login, please visit <https://www.canva.com/help/sign-up-log-in/>. If you have never used Canva, make sure you log in and look at the tool. Here are some tutorials (recommended watching “welcome home” and “start designing”)

<https://www.canva.com/designschool/tutorials/getting-started/>

Task 7 – Optional –Print Participant Handouts: 20 Minutes

We will not be offering printed handouts at this training. If you prefer paper, you will need to download the participant handout file found in the Participants Handout Module of this course and print it before you come. It is highly recommended that you download it to the device that you will be using at the event. Please make sure that you can access the online handouts before you come. There will not be on-site IT Support.

Community Agreements for Our Time

Awareness and Self-Knowledge

This requires self-knowledge and self-awareness. Self-knowledge allows you to see what causes you pain and conflict and enables you to embrace your contradictions and inconsistencies. It allows the space to work on things about yourself that you are not happy with. In turn, self-awareness helps to prevent you from projecting your negative aspects onto other people. Bringing your best self also requires that you have a positive attitude, are willing to deeply explore your perspectives and remain open to the perspectives and experiences of others. While engaging with peers and content, make space for others to engage as well.

Listening for Understanding

Be an active listener. Active listening involves paying full and careful attention to the other person, looking them in the eye, avoiding interruptions, reflecting your understanding, clarifying information, summarizing the other person's perspectives and sharing your own. Remember that most people need time to open up and might not be willing to immediately share their personal stories, hopes, fears and/or concerns.

Being Gracious

Being kind is a vital way of bringing meaning to our own lives, as well as the lives of others. Kindness is about caring genuinely for others around you, wanting the best for them and recognizing in them the same wants, needs, aspirations and even fears that you may have. Being kind and generous allows us to communicate better with others, to be more self-compassionate and to be a positive force in other people's lives. We are gracious when we accept and genuinely work to use the pronouns that others ask us to use. Being gracious includes following best practices to protect the health of this learning community (ex. handwashing, PPE, staying in your room if you are sick).

Staying Engaged

Staying engaged requires you to be morally, emotionally, intellectually and socially involved in the conversation. Staying engaged means that you are listening with curiosity and willing to deepen your understanding. Staying engaged might also require you to sustain the conversation even when it gets uncomfortable or diverted. This means a commitment to keeping your electronic communications to a minimum with folks not present in this learning community. This also means being present for all portions of the learning agenda.

Being Open and Suspending Judgment

Listening with an open mind includes being receptive to the influence of others. You can suspend judgment by becoming aware of preconceived notions and listening to everything someone has to say before jumping to conclusions. Most importantly, suspending judgment also means listening to what the speaker has to say for understanding, not just to determine whether the speaker is right or wrong. This means that we recognize each of us will make mistakes and that we have the capacity to grow. We should expect imperfections.

Saying "I"- tell your truth

Speaking your truth in authentic and courageous conversations about race and other issues where experiences/perspectives may differ widely from yours requires a willingness to take risks. It means that you will be absolutely honest and candid about your own thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions and not just saying what you perceive others want to hear. Speaking your truth will require you to speak from the "first person" and use "I" statements.

Lean into Discomfort

Leaning into discomfort will require you to let go of understandings and stereotypes that you may be holding onto in order to move forward. Leaning in means that you will avoid pre-judgment and be open to the kernel of wisdom in each individual's experiences. Leaning into discomfort will require you to sit through moments of embarrassment, confusion, anxiety, and/or fear.

Reaching Empathy

Empathy and compassion allow you to understand the other person's point of view. When you are empathetic, you are more understanding, patient and kind. Expanding your capacity to feel empathy will also allow others to enter your circle of human concern. Sharing, using, and respecting pronouns is a very simple form of empathy.

Expecting Non-Resolution and Non-Closure

Expect and accept that there may not be closure. It is not likely that you will resolve your personal understanding about race or another person's racial experience in a single conversation. The more you talk about race or other issues with another person, the more you learn and the more they will learn. Authentic and productive conversations about race and other issues where experiences/perspectives may differ widely from yours are continuous and always evolving. This means that sometimes we will have unfinished, unexplored, and shortened conversations about some concepts.

**Adapted from "Embracing equity and inclusion", Annie E. Casey Foundation*

What questions do you want to ask about any of the ideas in these agreements?

What additional agreements do you need in order to be a fully participating member of our learning community?

Can you commit to these agreements? If not, what would it take for you to be able to commit?

Prepare for Panel on Day 1: Estimated Time to Complete – 30 Minutes

We will be joined by staff and members from around the country with school board lessons to share. Panelist will describe their local school board dynamics, the program they ran, and the lessons learned.

Please read each of the linked articles below to understand more about the dynamics of their school district and brainstorm questions you would want to ask them.

Kansas <https://lawrencekstimes.com/2025/09/08/lea-pushes-usd497-living-wage/>

How have issues like ESP living wages affected your school board races? What issues will your community and members care about?

Colorado <https://coloradotimesrecorder.com/2025/10/davis-the-dark-money-in-your-mailbox/74041/>
<https://coloradonewslines.com/2025/10/31/millions-spent-colorados-school-board-elections/>

Does dark money come into your state like CO? Would your candidates be prepared for outside money to influence elections? Does your local/state affiliate have resources to spend on school board races?

Florida <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/20/us/politics/pipeline-fund-democrats-local-elections.html>
https://schoolboardspotlight.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Pipeline_SBSOnePager_08092024.pdf

How could a coalition effort like Pipeline be helpful in your state like it was in Florida? What kind of resources could it offer? What groups might you recruit?

Connecticut <https://cea.org/record-number-of-educators-elected-to-serve-their-communities/>

Are your members running for school board? Why not? If they aren't winning why do you think that is?

What questions do you have for the panelists for the Q&A?

School Board Campaign Planning Template

*Internal planning document for Staff & Governance

Step 1: Map your school board, community & local

Mapping your School Board:

District/Seat	Term Expires	School Board Member Name	Ally, Neutral, or Opponent?	Other relevant information

What seats/districts will you focus on? What seats will help you build or strengthen your majority?

Local Association Mapping:

- Organization Capacity

Building/Committee	Rep/Chair	% Active	% PAC	% Cell	% Email

- Communication Tools

Tool	Administrator(s)	# of Subscribers/Likes/etc.

- Engaging Your Leadership

How will we engage the candidate on our policy priorities and the campaign work we are doing? Who will be the primary point of contact?

What roles for member leaders will we have on the campaign? How will we recruit them?
How will we communicate/update each other?
How will we celebrate and create community?

- How are decisions made? Is it spelled out in our constitution & bylaws?

Who is on the interview team? How are they chosen?
How are recommendations approved?
How are budget decisions made?

- Legal: Consult with your Government Relations Department ASAP

Do we have PAC money? How do we access it? How can we spend it? What are the contribution limits? Who does the reporting?

Do we have dues money committed for member communication? If not, is there a crisis fund or re-appropriation of budget line item we can use?

What are the coordination rules?

What authority lines do we need to use?

Do we need a lawyer to approve items/literature we create?

Are there certain vendors we have to use?

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- | Group Name | Group Assets and Tax Status |
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- | Group Name | Why form a coalition with them? |
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Step 2: Goal Setting

Election Data & Vote Goal: Make sure to use data from the past 3 elections cycles for similar electoral years. For example, if the election is taking place during a presidential election cycle, you want to pull data from other presidential election years.

Year	Turnout	Registration	Turnout %

Formula to calculate your Vote Goal:

Step 1. Election Year Turnout % = Total Votes Cast / Total Voter Registration

Step 2. Projected Turnout % = Sum of Previous Election Year Turnout % / Number of Elections

Step 3. Projected Voter Turnout= Current Voter Registration x Projected Turnout %

Step 4. Vote goal for two candidates*= Expected Voter Turnout x .52

Vote Goal for three candidates*= Projected Voter Turnout/3+1

*viable candidates, add 5% cushion

- Vote Goals:
 - Candidate X
 - Candidate Y

Member Voting History:

*contact your state affiliate GR department on how to access this data

Year	General/Primary	% Members Voted

Members that live in District:

*contact your state affiliate GR department on how to access this data

District	Members from Local	Members from other Locals	Retirees

Internal Goals:

- _____ new volunteers
- _____% of members voting
- Increase PAC fundraising by_____

Step 3: Campaign Message

Message: Why does this election matter to voters? Why does this election matter to members*?

What message structure will we use (triangle, tully box, RCN)

*these may not be the same messages

Step 4: Vote Contact Tactics

How will we talk to voters? How will we talk to our members?

Tactic Examples: Canvassing, phone banking, direct mail, handwritten letters/postcards, texting, paid digital ads, 10-minute building blitzes, worksite one-on-ones, and organic social media posts

Tactic	Date	Target Audience	What is being communicated?	When is it being communicated?	Who is responsible?

Step 5: Budget

Budget: *make sure you consult with your state affiliate GR department to make sure you are spending money and reporting correctly

Item	Description	Dues/PAC	Cost

Step 6: Timeline

Important Dates (plug these dates into the timeline below or google calendar/template of your choice):

- Candidate Filing Deadline
- Primary Election Day (include early voting, mail ballot requests/return deadlines)
- General Election Day (include early voting, mail ballot requests/return deadline)

- Holidays/school breaks
- Popular community events
- Candidate Recommendation Process Interviews/Votes etc.
- Recommendation announcements to members/public
- Monthly Building Rep Meetings
- Association events that are good opportunities to talk to members about election or recruit volunteers
- Events/activities you have promised candidates to turn members out for

Timeline:

Month	Activity and Dates within Each Month
April	
May	
June	
July	
August	
September	
October	
November	

Candidate Recommendation Exercise

Your group will be holding a candidate interview with the challenging scenario below. You will have 10 minutes to start your interview and get through as many questions as you can. Use your prep time to decide if there are any strategies the local made before the interview to have a smooth, transparent process. Make sure to share this “pre-interview work” that happened when you present. Your group should decide your agenda for interview, questions, and roles. Make sure more than your Chair is speaking. Extra points will be awarded for creativity.

Group 1: You are interviewing first-time candidate Dr. Chatty Cathy who is running for School Board for an open seat. She has her PhD in Public Policy and has 2 kids in the school system. She has a large personality and gets offended easily. It is tough to get a word in once she starts talking and she tends to gossip about other local elected officials. She has a well-financed campaign and the local Red, Wine, & Blue group has become her core group of volunteers. She is running against 5 other candidates and is seen as the leader in this race.

Group 2: You are interviewing a first-time candidate Big Momma Liber- tay that is running against a friendly incumbent for School Board that your local endorsed in the last election. Big Momma does not want your endorsement. She is openly hostile and is using the interview to create content for her blog. She has a local Moms for Liberty chapter that are her primary volunteers and has received donations from the 1776 PAC.

Group 3: You are interviewing the most progressive person in your very conservative school district. Bernita Saunders has run for school board 15 times and has never finished in the top 2. She is on the right side of all of your issues, but refuses to campaign or raise money. Your members love her because she always gives fiery speeches at the budget hearing advocating for higher wages. She has been endorsed in all 15 elections by the previous Local Presidents & GR Chairs because they felt they had to endorse in every election. She is married to your UniServ Director.