

Guidance for Educators on Political Activity and Online Advocacy

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Educators care deeply about their students, schools and communities. Many educators choose to stay informed, speak out on public issues and participate in the democratic process, especially on issues affecting public schools and public education. ISTA encourages members to be informed, engaged advocates while also understanding the professional responsibilities and realities that come with working in public schools.

In recent years, educators across the country have faced increased public scrutiny, online harassment and efforts to target school employees over political speech and social media activity. Online posts can quickly spread beyond their intended audience and may be viewed by students, parents, administrators, media outlets and political groups.

This document provides general guidance to help educators think through political activity, advocacy and online engagement. Laws, district policies and circumstances vary, and this document is not legal advice.

Core Principles

As educators, you are both private citizens and professionals. In general, political activity is safest when it is clearly separated from your role as a school employee.

Keep these principles in mind:

- Use personal time, personal devices and personal accounts for political advocacy and campaign activity.
- Do not use school resources, classrooms or instructional time for political advocacy.
- Remember that social media posts, screenshots and online discussions can spread far beyond their intended audience, even when shared in private groups or with limited privacy settings.
- Be mindful that your role as an educator may affect how others interpret your public comments or online activity.
- Before posting online, consider how a message could be interpreted by students, parents, coworkers, administrators or the broader community.



Educators may have First Amendment protections for off-duty speech on matters of public concern. However, those protections are not absolute. Public school employers may restrict or respond to speech that is tied to official job duties, substantially disrupts the workplace or school environment, or violates school policies or laws.

Guardrails to Remember

Do not use school resources for political activity

Avoid using school email addresses, devices, internet access, printers, classrooms or other school resources to advocate for or against political candidates, political parties or referendums. Political advocacy should generally take place on personal time using personal devices and personal accounts.

Do not direct political advocacy toward students

Educators should avoid encouraging students to support or oppose political candidates, parties or referendums. Discussions about current events, government, elections and civic engagement may still be appropriate within the educational context and curriculum established by the school district. Educators should approach these conversations professionally and in an age-appropriate manner.

Protect confidential and non-public information

Do not share confidential student information or non-public information learned through your role as a school employee. Even posts intended to advocate for additional school funding, staffing or support can create concerns if they include information that is not otherwise publicly available.

Separate association resources from prohibited political activity

Association resources supported by member dues must comply with laws and rules governing political activity and elections. In general, members should avoid using association resources or official local association platforms to advocate for or against political candidates or referendums directed at the general public.



Common Questions

Can I wear campaign shirts, buttons or political apparel at school?

District policies and local circumstances vary. Educators should be mindful that schools are workplaces serving students and families with a wide range of political views. Clothing or displays that substantially disrupt the educational environment or conflict with district policies may create concerns.

Can I display campaign signs or political materials in my classroom or office?

Educators should use caution when displaying campaign materials or partisan political messaging in classrooms or other school spaces. District policies and expectations regarding political neutrality in instructional settings may apply.

Can I have a bumper sticker or magnet on my personal vehicle in the school parking lot?

In many cases, educators display political bumper stickers, magnets or campaign signs on personal vehicles. However, visibility on school property may still generate complaints or concerns depending on the circumstances and local policies.

Can I discuss political issues or elections with coworkers during the school day?

Brief conversations among colleagues may occur in the workplace, but educators should remain mindful of professional expectations, workplace disruption concerns and district policies. Political activity should not interfere with job responsibilities or instructional time.

Can I talk about politics with students?

Teaching about current events, government, elections and civic engagement can be an important part of education. However, educators should avoid using their position to pressure students to support or oppose political candidates, parties or referendums.

Can I volunteer for a campaign or help on Election Day?

Many educators volunteer for campaigns and civic activities on personal time. Using personal leave or approved time off for campaign activity may be permitted depending on district policies and individual circumstances.



Social Media and Online Activity

Many educators use personal social media accounts to share political opinions, support candidates and discuss issues affecting public schools and public education. Educators should approach online activity thoughtfully and carefully.

Keep in mind:

- Private accounts and private groups are not truly private. Screenshots, reposts and forwarded messages can quickly extend the reach of a post beyond its intended audience.
- Deleted posts may still exist in screenshots or archives.
- Reposting or sharing someone else's content can create the same concerns as creating the content yourself.
- Posts that appear to celebrate violence, threaten individuals, target groups or use inflammatory language could lead to discipline or investigations.
- Speech that substantially disrupts the school environment or workplace may receive less legal protection, even when made off duty and on personal accounts.
- Avoid sharing information learned through your role as a school employee unless that information is already public.
- Before posting, consider whether a statement could be misunderstood, selectively edited or taken out of context.
- Review privacy settings regularly and consider whether older posts still reflect how you want to present yourself publicly.

If concerns are raised or you are targeted online

If an administrator raises concerns about political activity or social media posts, or if you become the target of online harassment or public attacks:

- Avoid escalating the situation publicly or arguing online.
- Preserve relevant emails, screenshots, posts or other communications.
- Document threatening or harassing messages, including dates and times when possible.
- Contact your local president and/or ISTA UniServ Director as soon as possible.
- ISTA can help assess the situation and determine possible next steps based on the circumstances.
- Communications support may also be available if media attention or online targeting escalates.



Final Reminder

Political engagement and civic participation are important, and educators play a valuable role in their communities both inside and outside the classroom. Thoughtful advocacy can help strengthen public schools and ensure educators, students and families are heard on issues affecting public education.

At the same time, educators should approach political activity and online engagement carefully, recognizing that laws, district policies and individual circumstances vary. When in doubt, pause and seek guidance before acting or posting online.

Disclaimer

This document is intended to provide general guidance for educators on political activity and online advocacy. Laws, district policies and individual circumstances vary. This document is not legal advice. Members with questions or concerns should contact their local president or ISTA UniServ Director.

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