

November 13, 2023

Public Disclosure Commission,

The school districts of Southwest Washington, located within the ESD 112 region, respectfully request your consideration and collaboration in the process of reviewing and updating PDC guidance for school elections communication.

We appreciate the complexity of the PDC's work and your efforts to ensure that voters receive accurate and impartial information on important issues. Simultaneously, we confront the daily challenge of "breaking through" the noise of countless distractions to deliver essential information to our local constituents, especially when their participation is required in the electoral process.

In light of the PDC's strategic focus on identifying and responding to emerging trends and issues as it continues to become more agile and responsive, we felt it important to share some of the considerations that districts face when planning informational campaigns, both for election initiatives and other purposes.

We respectfully request the commission consider these points and work collaboratively with school communications professionals to understand current best practices as you consider updating PDC guidance and regulating social media and other 21st-century communication tools.

- **Message Repetition is Routine and Necessary:** School districts must vie for their stakeholders' increasingly limited time and attention. Districts routinely repeat (sending emails or text messages or posting to social media multiple times) information that is important for families, staff, students, and community members to know. We believe it is a reasonable request to continue this practice for bonds and levies, in alignment with our standard practices.
- **Social Media is Complex yet a Cost-Effective Information Delivery Method:** Our communities seek and expect information on a variety of social media platforms, which means most districts maintain several social media profiles to reach the different stakeholders we serve.
 - **Social media platforms favor short, succinct, and repeated posts,** and often limit the amount of information and content that can be provided in a single post. Districts must divide up complex topics such as what a levy measure or bond measure would fund into separate topics, and present each topic individually, in order to share all necessary information. Limits on the number of social media posts allowed could impede a district's ability to share pertinent information about a measure necessary for informed decision-making by voters.
 - **Social media platforms use algorithms, which impact whether or not a post is seen by an intended audience.** In other words, just because a district posts something on a social media platform, doesn't mean it will be viewed or even

show up in the news feed of its intended audience. School districts have no control over social media algorithms. Limiting social media posts for election measures would, in effect, withhold information from voters and inadvertently impact transparency.

- **Social media is a cost-effective option for information-sharing in budget-conscious school districts** working hard to most responsibly utilize taxpayer funds. Social media advertising is often far more cost-effective than traditional advertising methods, and it allows for the visibility of posts that algorithms may otherwise block.
- **Diversity and Equity in Communications:** Districts serve parents and guardians across a range of generations, home languages, and socioeconomics, with different communication preferences. We must use a variety of tools and communication tactics to equitably accommodate the unique needs of every family.
- **Communications about Students Should Reflect Students:** The PDC recognizes that campaigns include informing communities of the needs the district faces and needs students have that the community may not realize exist. Personalizing those needs through articles, videos, posts, quotes, and presentations about individuals, classes, and schools is essential to building awareness and is consistent with best communications practices. A district also has a responsibility to communicate to voters how it anticipates that the funding will affect student outcomes.
- **Informed Decision-Making and Transparency:** Further limits to modern communications tools could impede the democratic process. Local voter turnout rates across our state are consistently below 40% and often closer to 30% turnout rates. In recent elections, many local constituents reported to their school districts that they had “no idea” that the school district had a levy measure on the ballot and “Why doesn’t the school district share more information?” despite the district’s PDC-compliant information-sharing efforts. Access to information and transparent communications are essential in informed decision-making. Limitations to communication and information-sharing could result in *even lower* voter turnout for crucial electoral measures.

Our Request:

We respectfully request that the PDC collaborate with school communications professionals to update and regularly examine the strategies and technologies crucial for disseminating timely and relevant information to stakeholders in the digital age.

Today’s communications tools and platforms are ever-changing. Platforms and methods that are effective one year may become outdated the next. Consequently, a continuous assessment of communication efforts is imperative. Research is fundamental to the practice of public relations and strategic communications and is also cited as a key focus in the PDC’s strategic plan. School communications professionals stand ready to work with the commission in continuous research of best practices, ensuring guidance remains up-to-date with changing information delivery methods.

Together, we have a shared commitment to responsibly and objectively fulfill the informational needs of our communities, equipping them with the knowledge they require to make informed decisions on matters that directly affect them and their voting choices. Thank you for your consideration and partnership in this important work.

Sincerely,

The school districts, superintendents, and communications professionals within ESD 112

Battle Ground

Camas

Evergreen

Green Mountain

Hockinson

La Center

Ridgefield

Vancouver

Washougal

Castle Rock

Kalama

Kelso

Longview

Woodland

White Salmon

Naselle-Grays River Valley

Mill A

Skamania

Stevenson-Carson

Klickitat

Wahkiakum

Glenwood

Mt Pleasant

Trout Lake

Roosevelt