

Ensuring Sustainability of Education Reform Agenda during a Gubernatorial Campaign



Getting Started

Knowing that gubernatorial support for education reform is vital to success, it is important to ensure that candidates understand and embrace efforts to improve student achievement. Each candidate during a campaign will develop his or her platform on a number of issues, education being one. Obviously, it is advantageous to get your message to candidates early in that process.

It is helpful to have a public policy committee to provide input and assistance as you develop your strategy. Include business people – of both major parties – who have knowledge of the politics and legislative process in your state (i.e. lobbyists, former government officials). Develop a timeline (see attached).

The Process

- **Define the elements of reform that are important to preserve or initiate.** Identify those which are most critical (i.e. standards, accountability), those which are likely to be in peril and those which are relatively secure (never assume anything is totally secure). Research candidates' prior positions through voting records, speeches, media coverage, etc.
- **Obtain names and campaign headquarters addresses for all candidates.** Include every candidate; don't wait until the primary election narrows the field.
- **Develop a brief but comprehensive questionnaire** reflecting the issues you have identified as important. Ask questions in a manner that requires candidates to explain their position and strategies for achieving their vision. It's also a good idea to begin some questions with a positive, informing statement. For example:
 - Don't ask: "Do you support continued use of testing as a means of raising student performance?"
 - Ask: "Our new statewide assessment program has been recognized as a national model. Do you support continuation of these assessments? If not, how would you recommend that we effectively measure the skills, knowledge and abilities we expect our schools to produce with their students?"
 - Don't ask: "What will you do over the next four years to ensure that Maryland high school graduates meet higher standards?"
 - Ask: "The quality of life in Maryland in the next century depends on continuing to raise the performance of our schools. In what ways would you build on the past eight years of school reform to ensure that Maryland's high school graduates are competitive in the next century?"
- **Prepare a mailing to each candidate** which includes (samples attached):
(All correspondence should be sent over your Board chairman's signature.)
 1. a letter introducing your organization and requesting that they complete and return your questionnaire
 2. the questionnaire
 3. a statement of your legislative priorities
 4. an annual report of other descriptive material about your organization

Include a date for return of the questionnaire. And be sure to allow several weeks for their reply. Yours is not the only request they will receive.

- When questionnaires are returned, **prepare a summary of responses** from each candidate
- If other organizations are holding gubernatorial forums/debates, contact the organizers and ask them to include two or three of your education-related questions on their agenda. Business groups interview or survey candidates and are looking for well-thought-out questions to ask. Send them yours. The intention is to give the candidates a universal message that high standards, rigorous assessments and strong accountability are front-burner issues
- **Set a date – between the primary and general election – for a dialogue among each victorious candidate and a group of corporate CEOs.** Select two time slots (30-40 minutes), one for each candidate, with ample time between so that CEOs can discuss their reactions and so that candidates will not collide in the lobby. Be sure to arrange for a “holding area” and someone to greet the second candidate in the event he or she should arrive early.
- **Invite your Board of Directors and several other respected CEOs to participate in the dialogue.** A group of 10-15 is sufficient. Provide them with a summary of the candidates’ responses to the questionnaire, sample questions they could ask, and a statement of your legislative priorities. (Don’t assume your CEOs are well versed in your priorities.) Sample questions will help keep your folks from digressing to other issues they care about that are not on your agenda. This forum is for education issues only. You may want to ask your CEOs to arrive half an hour before the first candidate is scheduled so that you can brief them.
- The day after the primary election, **send a letter of congratulations to the two victorious candidates.** Invite them to the dialogue with CEOs. Give them specific information about date, time, location, and a list of the CEOs you have invited.
- **Confirm the attendance of your CEOs.** Make tent cards with each CEOs name and company for the conference table, so candidates can easily identify and address questioners by name. Keep to your schedule, everyone’s time is valuable.
- **Send a thank-you letter to each candidate,** perhaps again highlighting the issues that are important to you.
- The day after the general election, **send a letter of congratulations to the governor-elect** and offer your assistance as he or she prepares an education agenda.

In Reflection

It is important to remember that each candidate is trying to establish a distinction between himself or herself and the other candidates. Also, each candidate has allies and supporters whose opinions influence their positions. Often times, if a case is presented effectively and with the strong voice of business, candidates will readjust their views, if not during the campaign, possibly during the administration.

We found it worked for us to take a nonpartisan stance. Do not endorse or campaign for a candidate. Be perceived as an objective champion for education reform and a potential ally to all candidates.

Keep your message succinct, and hammer it home in as many ways and from as many places as possible. Business executives attend fundraisers, and a quietly asked question or strong statement to a candidate can be very effective.

Make no enemies. Don’t discount the views of others. Whether or not they are valid, they are real. Persuasion is much more effective than persecution.