



Colorado Children's Campaign Candidate Forum Tool Kit

The *It's About Kids* Network (IAK) is an initiative of the Colorado Children's Campaign. IAK communities, together with the CCC work to empower citizens, community organizations and policymakers to make positive changes that create hope and opportunity for all of Colorado's children. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this vision is to host a local candidate forum about children's issues.

This Tool Kit provides in-depth guidance, ideas and examples that are designed for *It's About Kids* networks, but that can be tailored for use by any organization. The Colorado Children's Campaign is providing this resource to child advocates like you, with the hope that you will host a candidate forum in your community to help educate your voters as well as your candidates, and to put leaders in office who will champion issues for kids.

The majority of the twelve IAK communities are already planning candidate forums. The process is simple, the event is fun and it can generate great media attention for your organization and for kids' issues at the state and local levels. **It is not lobbying and it is not partisan – *It's About Kids!***

The Campaign can provide your community with effective strategies and technical assistance in organizing your candidate forum in the following areas:

- Question Development: We can provide you with county specific data that will help you formulate questions relative to your community.
- Media Outreach: We can give you a framework that will help develop a communication plan around your event.
- Forum Facilitation: When available, staff from the Campaign can actually help facilitate the candidate forum.

Step One: Form a Team

Hosting a successful candidate forum takes some effort and forming a reliable team can help spread the workload. You can utilize your existing *It's About Kids* committee members, other organizations and coalitions or team up with a local League of Women Voters chapter. Usually four or five volunteers make an effective team.

Subcommittees

- Outreach, relationships and communication to the candidates;
- Logistics; and
- Agenda/questions/forum format.

★ Tip: For the upcoming 2006 election, begin this process now.

Step Two: Arrange a Date and Location

Once you determine which races you want to cover (State Senate or House of Representatives, District Attorney, County Commissioner, City Council, School Board, Sherriff, etc.), a member of your team must contact each of the candidates and secure a date for the forum. This should be done as soon as possible as candidates' calendars fill up fast with other forums and election events. Be patient; it takes a lot of e-mails, and phone calls as well as a healthy dose of persistence to coordinate this part of the event.

Selecting the Time and Place

- Talk to candidates about their availability prior to scheduling the event. They are more likely to attend if you plan the event around their schedules than vice versa.
- Select a location that is central, neutral and comfortable, and then confirm the logistics. The room should have good acoustics, comfortable seating and ample space for tables.
- Plan on at least two hours for an effective forum that covers all children's issue areas: K-12 education; early care and education; health care, youth development and budget issues.
- Food is always a great thing to provide. It is usually relatively easy to find someone willing to donate cookies, coffee/tea, etc.

★ Tip: At a successful Canon City Candidate Forum, organizers had the candidates come early to have dinner with invited guests then the general public and media arrived for the actual forum.

Step Three: Planning the Event

Each year, *It's About Kids* communities, working closely with the Campaign, develop a set of legislative and policy priorities in addition to a Kids' Platform during an election year. By focusing the candidate questions on these specific issues, there is an increased chance that your policy priorities will be understood and acted upon in the future.

The first decision your team will make is what questions to ask and in what fashion. Selection of the questions is best done by pulling together a team of people "in the know."

Develop Questions

- You might consider hosting a meeting with your mental health center, school district personnel, child care center association, consolidated pilot project, teen serving organizations or coalitions, etc. These are

community members who are often familiar with legislative and policy issues beyond generalities.

- From this one-time meeting, formulate a list of questions.
- You can use e-mail to refine the question list by getting input from your broader committees and groups.
- Once you have your final list of questions, get them to the candidates ahead of time. Candidates appreciate this gesture as it allows them to research issues that might not have been brought to their attention previously and then to make informed decisions regarding their position on the issue.

Once you have developed your questions, you will need to plan an agenda that outlines the general flow of the forum.

Setting an Agenda

- You can utilize someone from the Colorado Children's Campaign to moderate the event or you can select someone from your own community who is an experienced facilitator. Selecting someone credible is very important.
- Decide the order that the questions will be asked and the order that the candidates will answer them.
- You should kick off the forum with a brief introduction of the *It's About Kids Network*, the Colorado Children's Campaign and your own organization or coalition. You might also want a table with information about the Campaign, IAK, your organization and email sign-ups for the Campaign advocacy network.
- Allow time to announce the ground rules and the process for asking and answering questions at the beginning of the event.
- Have someone keep time as it can be an immense help to the moderator. Candidates often tend to dominate and take up too much time! Having the time keeper use "yellow" and "red" cards can warn the candidates when they have one minute left (yellow card) and when their time is up (red card).

Once the questions on your agenda are asked and answered, you can use any remaining time to involve the audience. Below are some suggested ways of including your attendees.

Question and Answer Opportunities

- Prior to the planned question time - hand out index cards and pencils to the audience and instruct them to write any questions they may have on the cards.

- Before the forum officially begins have someone collect and sort the cards and then give them to the moderator to ask during the latter part of the forum.
- An alternative idea is to take questions openly from the audience. It is important to gage the mood and tone of the forum. Using index cards ensures civility and guarantees that no question is asked twice. It also prevents audience members from dominating the discussion.

Important things to remember

- You want candidates to answer questions intelligently and in-depth. Consider sending a packet of information with the questions, updated Kids Count data, It's *About Kids* and Campaign materials along with any local information on your own programs. These are materials they can keep and refer to if elected!
- Offer to meet with all of the candidates prior to the forum to review the status of kids in your community. This can be time consuming but it is a great way to establish relationships and inform the candidates on the issues.
- Never show support for, or endorse any candidate. In all planning, remain absolutely fair, even-handed and transparent at all times (i.e. not supporting or showing favoritism to one candidate or political party).
- Ensure that your moderator is a credible person who can keep the forum on track and who will not be viewed as partisan. Note: It is important that moderators are able to effectively cut candidates off if they are abusing the time-keeping system. The moderator should feel free to say something like: "We have to move on to the next question so I'll need to cut you off," or "Please respect the time limits so we can hear from everyone."
- Announce the agenda, the time-keeping system, audience participation and the order of questioning before the forum starts so there is a group understanding of exactly how the forum will work. Note: You might consider posting two simple ground rules on a flip-chart: a) everyone's opinion counts even if you disagree with it; and b) one person talks at a time.

Step Four: Media Plan

Consider this vision: 50, 100 or even 200 people attend your forum. They ask kid-focused questions of future policy makers and express their positions on key issues. The media covers the event and the next day, gives your IAK group an incredible headline! It is not out of the question if you plan and advertise your event well! Here are some ideas for publicity that are tested and work:

- One of the most effective ways to increase attendance is to have your forum as early as possible because that is when interest in candidate forums is strongest.

- Send out a save the date card or an invitation a month in advance. Don't forget to invite people from human services agencies, child, family and youth coalitions, school principals, administrators and personnel, PTA organizations and child care centers - anyone you can think of!
- It always helps to follow up with a phone call reminding people about your event a week before. Don't worry about calling everyone, but at least try to call the people you know.
- Call and invite your local newspaper reporters. Be sure to let them know the purpose and theme of the event, who you have invited and which candidates have confirmed their attendance.
- Send out a press release a day or two prior to the event. A sample press release is included with this tool kit. The Colorado Children's Campaign staff is available to help write or edit press release materials.
- Send Public Service Announcements (PSA's) out 10 days ahead of time. Don't forget that PSA's are a way of getting the word out both through the radio and the newspaper.
- Send out email announcements.
- Hang flyers up all over your community and county.
- Contact teachers at local high schools, junior colleges, or universities. Ask professors to talk about civic engagement with their classes and encourage attendance.

Make this the event to attend this campaign season!

The Colorado Children's Campaign staff
is available to help and offer technical assistance.
Contact Bruce at bruce@coloradokids.org or
Lindsay at lindsay@colroadokids.org



Candidate Forum on Children's Issues
Sample Questions
Three candidates x 3 minutes per question = 45 minutes

The following is a list of sample questions addressing K-12 education, early childhood education, children's health, youth development and fiscal issues. Feel free to modify the questions to meet the specific needs of your community, keeping in mind the positions that the candidates participating in your event are vying for.

K-12 Education

1. We know that roughly one third of the kids who enter the 9th grade, do not graduate with their classmates. For low-income and minority kids, the rate is even worse. What do you plan to do to help increase the proportion of young people that graduate from high school?
2. We have large and significant gaps in academic performance between kids based on things like gender, family income, and racial and ethnic background. These gaps have been around for a long time, they are large, and they are not getting any better. What would you do to help close these gaps?
3. Many of our public schools are doing an excellent job, but some of our schools just aren't getting the job done. We have some schools where too many children are dropping out or falling behind. What do you think should be done to intervene when schools chronically fail in their public mission to educate all children?
4. Colorado is a state with a lot of public school choice. We have charter schools and policies that allow many families to pick the school they prefer both in their district and in neighboring districts. While all children deserve an excellent school, what can you do to ensure that kids from low-income families and those who are at risk of failing in school have excellent schools to choose from and full access to all available options?
5. We do a lot of reporting on school performance, but it's not always clear that we are reporting how well schools are doing with all children. What do you think can be done to improve the state's accountability mechanisms so that all parents really know how well their schools are doing at helping all kids learn and grow?

ECE

1. Two years of full-day, full-year early learning such as preschool and full-day kindergarten help children at-risk for school failure start school ready to learn. How would you ensure that every child at-risk for school failure has access to preschool and full-day kindergarten?
2. For every \$1 invested in high quality early care and education, between \$4 and \$12 is saved later in costs for special education services, health care and social services. How would you prioritize early childhood spending in Colorado?
3. Early childhood programs are fragmented in three different state departments and historically under funded. How would you work with state departments, Smart Start Colorado and the Early Childhood and School Readiness Commission to better coordinate early childhood programs and services to create an early childhood system?
4. The Colorado Child Care Assistance Program helps many low-income families afford child care through subsidies to parents. Do you support this program and, if so, how would you work to ensure that there is more funding for it? How would you encourage counties to increase the quality of child care supported through the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program?
5. Government cannot solve all of the issues we face in ECE, i.e. quality, affordability, availability, workforce, etc. What do you think can be done to create more public/private partnerships in solving the issues we face in ECE?

Health

1. Immunizations have been shown to be effective methods of preventive care, yet Colorado consistently ranks at the bottom of states for the number of fully immunized kids at age three. How would you increase support for immunizations in our state?
2. Many children and families, particularly in rural areas do not have access to providers who accept Medicaid and/or CHP+. How would you increase access to providers for these low-income kids and parents?
3. There has been a movement in Colorado to streamline publicly-funded programs including an effort to combine CHP+ and Medicaid to make it easier for families to receive care. How would you continue to streamline systems of care in Colorado?
4. Children and families receive care from various sources including public clinics, public health nurses and school-based health centers. How would you support those important providers?
5. Employer-sponsored insurance is considered the backbone of health coverage, yet many children and families cannot participate in this coverage either because their employers do not offer insurance or because the employee cannot afford it. How would you work to make employer-sponsored coverage more affordable?

Fiscal

1. There are such a wide range of competing demands for the state's limited resources. Where do you see children's issues in your budget priority list?
2. What have you done in the past that would tell us about your commitment to children's issues?



Candidate Forum on Children's Issues SAMPLE Agenda

6:30 PM

Welcoming Comments, information about the Colorado Children's Campaign, *It's About Kids*, and Structure of the Forum

6:35 PM

Introduction of the Moderator -

6:35 – 8:00 PM

Formal Questions to the Candidates

8:00 – 8:30 PM

Questions from the Audience

It's About Kids is a local grassroots advocacy network that advocates for children and youth locally and at the Colorado Legislature.

It's About Kids has been working in select communities on behalf of kids since 1998 and is an initiative of the Colorado Children's Campaign.

Through educating our local and state elected officials on key issues, hosting advocacy trainings, taking on local projects, hosting candidate forums and providing local data, *It's About Kids* is working to improve the lives of children and families by focusing on prevention, K-12 education, health care and early childhood care and education.

SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

[YOUR ORGANIZATION'S LOGO/LETTERHEAD HERE]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
[Date]

Contact: [Name]
[Phone number/email]

NEWS ADVISORY

CANDIDATES TO FOCUS ON ISSUES IMPACTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT FORUM ON [DATE]

Candidates running for public office in [XXXX county or appropriate area name] including [prominent names from each party here] will participate in a candidate forum at [name of location] on [Date] at [Time].

The forum, sponsored by [sponsoring organization(s)] will focus on issues that impact families and children in [XXX county or area] including children's health care, K-12 education, and the accessibility of quality early care and education.

The forum will be moderated by [name or panel members' name] and the audience will have an opportunity to ask questions directly of the candidates as time permits. The forum is open to the public and will be rebroadcast on [radio station or local public television??] on [date, time].

[Quote from local sponsor here. Example: "This forum is an opportunity for people in our community to hear directly from the candidates about issues that impact our families and children every day," said XXXX. "It is also a chance to show the candidates that these issues will be a priority when we are casting our votes on Election Day."

Candidate forums are being held across the state prior to the November election, in conjunction with the It's About Kids network, an initiative of the Colorado Children's Campaign. [Name of your organization] is a member of the It's About Kids network, a diverse group of child advocates educating policymakers and the public about children's issues.

For more information about the candidate forum, please contact XXXXX. For more information about children's issues, please contact the Colorado Children's Campaign at www.coloradokids.org

**WHAT: Candidate Forum Focusing on Issues Impacting Children in
[Community Name]
When: [Date, Time]
Where: [Location]**