

Our town school district has adopted Australian ballot voting for the school budget. Can any discussion take place at town meeting regarding the school budget or any school issues at all? If so, to what extent?

The general rule is that where Australian ballot voting is taking place, there shall be no discussion of the issues, including campaigning or lobbying, nor shall anyone be allowed to hand out political materials or solicit voters while the polls are open. 17 V.S.A. § 2508. Therefore, discussion of school issues at town meeting can only take place if the school budget vote is taking place in another building or at another time. In most cases, it is likely that both the town and school district annual meeting will take place in the same building, at the same time; therefore, it would not be appropriate for the voters to discuss school issues at the town meeting. The town clerk, as presiding officer of Australian ballot votes, shall enforce the regulations contained in 17 V.S.A. § 2508. See also 17 V.S.A. §§ 2452, 2680 (f).

Many towns begin their town meetings the night prior to town meeting, by discussing issues that are voted on from the floor. Australian ballot voting happens the following day. State law authorizes towns to begin their annual meetings, as well as to conduct an “informational hearing,” within the 10 days preceding town meeting. 17 V.S.A. § 2640 (c), 17 V.S.A. § 2680 (g). (These two meetings may be combined.) In such a case, school issues would be appropriately debated the night prior to Australian ballot voting on town meeting day.

VLCT News, February 2003