



Texas High School Voter Registration

A How to Guide

February 2025

Texas High Schools Must Help Students Register to Vote

Twice a year, high school principals must offer students the chance to register to vote, if they are 18 or will turn 18 that school year. **It's a state law!**

The right to vote is a cornerstone of our democracy and it is our responsibility to encourage students to engage in their communities through voting. Registering students on high school campuses is a crucial step in that direction.

In order to develop this untapped opportunity, high school principals and community leaders must be informed of the ins-and-outs of high school voter registration. This guide is here to help you do just that.

TCRP's past research¹ has found that a significant number of school administrators are unaware of their duties to register high school students who are or will be 18 years of age or older during that semester. Moreover, many who have heard about this state law do not understand the exact requirements. With the information in this guide, principals and community leaders can help increase awareness and compliance of the law.

Texas high school principals have a duty to make sure their students have an opportunity to register to vote. To make this happen, Texas law designates principals as a special kind of voter registrar - a high school deputy registrar (HSDR).

To accomplish this, HSDRs must distribute voter registration ("VR") forms **at least** twice each academic year to all students who are 18 or will soon turn 18.²

What Must HSDRs Do?

- Provide a notice about submitting completed VR forms
- Review each form for completeness³
- Deliver all forms to the county voter registrar in person or by mail⁴; and
- Ensure that every form is received by the county voter registrar by 5:00pm on the 5th day after collection and no later than the 29th day before Election Day⁵

¹ Stephanie Gomez, *High School Voter Registration 2020: Communities Across Texas Prioritize Youth Civic Engagement*, Texas Civil Rights Project (August 2020), https://www.txcivilrights.org/files/uqd/aab911_9d8048ef119b4d979842f055f7bb5055.pdf.

² Tex. Elec. Code 13.046(d).

³ Tex. Elec. Code 13.039, 13.046(f).

⁴ Tex. Elec. 13.042, 13.046(f).

⁵ Tex. Elec. Code 13.024, 13.046(f).

High School Deputy Registrar Pitfalls

In Texas, it is possible for any deputy registrar to face criminal liability for the mishandling of VR materials. While this may sound scary, some basic knowledge can largely prevent high school principals from running afoul of the law.

Importantly, only one person at each school is permitted to collect and/or submit completed VR forms. By default, the principal is the HSDR, but principals can specifically assign one staff member or teacher as a designee to take over their duties.

Any other person, including other administrators, teachers, and students, who handle a completed form commits a Class C misdemeanor, unless they have been deputized as a Volunteer Deputy Registrar (VDR) by county officials.⁶

Registration Opportunities for Everyone Else

If you are not the HSDR, you can still help register students, or any other citizen over the age of 18, to vote. Teachers, members of the PTA, grassroots groups, student organizations, and others can and should organize VR drives. To do so, however, you must first be appointed as a VDR in a particular county.

The difference between HSDRs and VDRs is that HSDRs use a special VR form issued by the Secretary of State⁷ for use on campus and they must offer students the opportunity to register twice per academic year at their schools. VDRs can host VR drives anytime throughout the year and can register people anywhere, so long as each would-be voter is a resident of the county in which the VDR is appointed.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who can be a High School Deputy Registrar?

All high school principals serve as HSDRs. A principal may designate ONLY ONE administrative staff person or teacher employed at the school to act in lieu of the principal. If a principal designates someone else as the HSDR, the principal has to provide that designated representative with a form or card identifying the representative as an HSDR.⁸

⁶ Tex. Elec. Code 13.044.

⁷ <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/hsvoterregistrationorderform>

⁸ Tex. Admin. Code 81.7(c).

Who can be a Volunteer Deputy Registrar?

The majority of Texans can become VDRs by completing several steps. An eligible voter over 18 years of age will qualify to be a VDR unless they have been convicted of certain crimes involving fraudulent use or possession of identifying information or have a felony conviction which has not been finally discharged.⁹ If they meet the eligibility criteria, VDR hopefuls must complete a training course and may be required to take an examination.¹⁰ If successful, they will then be issued a certificate of appointment by the voter registrar of the county.¹¹ Everyone who completes these steps can become an official VDR and start registering people to vote.

Who Can Pass out Blank Mail-in VR Forms and Encourage Voting?

Everyone! There are no restrictions on who can pass out blank forms, answer questions about VR and voting, and encourage students to make their voices heard at the polls. State law only kicks in when a person handles a completed VR form for someone else.¹²

Who Can Register to Vote with the High School Deputy Registrar?

HSDRs may only register students and school employees, and not members of the general public.¹³

How Often can HSDRs Distribute Registration Forms?

HSDRs must distribute voter registration applications during the final month of each semester to high school students who are, or will be, 18 years of age or older during that semester.¹⁴ However, there is no legal limit to the number of times an HSDR may distribute voter registration applications to students at their school, and HSDRs may distribute VR forms to students and employees who request them at any time of the year.¹⁵

⁹ Tex. Elec. Code 13.031. For more information, see the Secretary of State's website for complete information on becoming a VDR:

<https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/laws/volunteer-deputy-registrars.shtml>

¹⁰ Tex. Elec. Code 13.047.

¹¹ Tex. Elec. Code 13.033.

¹² See *Voting for Am., Inc. v. Steen*, 732 F.3d 382, 390-91 (5th Cir. 2013).

¹³ Tex. Elec. Code 13.046(c).

¹⁴ Tex. Admin. Code 81.7(d)(2).

¹⁵ Id.

School principals should receive blank VR forms in the mail from the Secretary of State's office. If a school does not receive the forms, they have to contact the Secretary of State for the registration forms, and not the county voter registrar.¹⁶

Figure 1. Regular VR Form

Figure 2. VR Form for use by HSDR

Of course! Students and employees can ask for help from the HSDR when they are filling out their VR form. When the student or employee finishes filling out their VR form, the HSDR must review it for completeness, which may be done out of the applicant's presence. If the HSDR notices the VR form is incomplete or does not include the required signature, the HSDR should find the applicant and explain what the VR form is missing.¹⁷

The applicant can then complete the form and resubmit it to the HSDR.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Id.*

How Can Voters Return their VR Forms?

Once a voter completes a VR form, it needs to get to the county voter registrar. This can happen in one of several ways. The voter can hand it to the HSDR or to any VDR from that county.¹⁹ The voter can also mail it directly to the county voter registrar. However, if the voter personally mails the form, he or she must find the address for the voter registrar and write it on the form before mailing it.

To find the address for a county's voter registrar, please visit:

<https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/voter/votregduties.shtml>

How do HSDRs Return Completed VR Forms?

Once a completed VR form is submitted to an HSDR, it is the responsibility of the HSDR to deliver the completed form to the county voter registrar, either by hand delivering it in person or by mailing it in an envelope or package. If an HSDR collects multiple VR forms at the same time, they can bundle them together to mail to the county voter registrar.

How Long do HSDRs have to Return Completed VR Forms?

An HSDR should make sure that VR forms are received by the county voter registrar as soon as possible, but always within 5 days. This means the VR forms must actually be in the voter registrar's office within 5 days (not just postmarked), so HSDRs must be careful to mail VR forms soon after receiving them.

HSDRs should also be aware if an election is coming up soon because VR forms must be delivered no later than 5 p.m. of the 29th day before the election day, even if the HSDR received the VR form less than 5 days prior.²⁰

If a student or employee tries to submit a VR form to an HSDR after 5 p.m. on the 29th day before election day, the HSDR needs to explain that they cannot submit the form and refer the student to the county's voter registrar. A voter can cast a ballot thirty days after they submit a completed VR form to an HSDR.²¹

If a high school enrolls students who live in multiple counties, the HSDR should be cautious to separate the VR forms for individual counties and mail them to the correct county's office. **Failing to return completed VR forms within these deadlines is a criminal offense, so HSDRs should pay close attention to these rules.**²²

¹⁹ Tex. Admin. Code 81.7(d)(2)(A)(B) and (C).

²⁰ Tex. Admin. Code 81.7(d)(3)(A); Tex. Elec. Code 13.046(f), 13.041, 13.042.

²¹ Tex. Admin. Code 81.7(d)(3)(B).

²² Tex. Admin. Code 81.7(d)(4).

How can an HSDR Avoid Criminal Sanctions?

A principal may appoint ONLY ONE HSDR. Other staff members can also register students and fellow staff members, but only after being appointed as a VDR (see “Who Can be a Volunteer Deputy Registrar?” above). Anyone who is not an HSDR or a VDR CANNOT collect a VR form and/or deliver it to the county voter registrar. However, HSDRs and VDRs should feel free to assist in this way. To stay within legal parameters, remember these tips:

- Only handle a completed VR form if you are a designated HSDR or VDR
- Only deliver VR forms to the county voter registrar if you are a designated HSDR or VDR
- Return the forms to the county voter registrar ASAP, but at least within 5 days
- Anyone can distribute the general VR forms available at the county voter registrar’s office

If an HSDR does not adhere to these rules, they can face a Class C misdemeanor.²³ If an HSDR intentionally fails to deliver the VR forms by the deadline, the penalty can be even higher, subjecting the HSDR to a Class A misdemeanor.²⁴ One way for an HSDR to use the utmost caution is to confer with the county voter registrar of elections administrator of the county or counties in which the students and employees of the high school reside before passing out or collecting VR forms on campus.²⁵

Need More Information

For clarification, feel free to review the Texas Administrative Code, Title 1, Rule 81.7, entitled “Directive for High School Deputy Registrars.” Additionally, Sections 13.039, 13.041, 13.042, and 13.046 of the Texas Election Code describe legal obligations for HSDRs, or review the Secretary of State’s “High School Deputy Registrar FAQs” at <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/forms/2024-september-high-school-faq.pdf>.

For further information on voting, please visit www.VoteTexas.gov.

²³ Tex. Admin. Code 81.7(d)(4); Tex. Elec. Code 13.046(g).

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ Tex. Admin. Code 81.7(e)(1).