

Polling Place Safety

THE COUNCIL SUPPORTS authorizing school districts to decline designation of school buildings as polling places.

School superintendents in New York State and across America take it as a personal obligation to all families to do everything possible to keep every child safe while they are at school. In aftermath of horrific tragedies in Parkland, Florida and elsewhere, superintendents and their local partners have been re-examining security in their schools and attempting to reassure families that no deficiency is being overlooked and no reasonable improvement will be dismissed. Our schools remain among the safest places for children and young people.

However, current laws surrounding the designation of polling places make the job of keeping students safe on election days more challenging. Once a county board of elections designates a school building as a polling place, that school building must be made available for the election. All other public entities have the ability to attempt to reject designation of their buildings, but school districts do not have that same authority.

Legislation is needed that would enable schools to better protect students by providing schools with two new options. Schools should be able to reject its designation as a polling location and the board of elections should be forced to designate another polling location. Alternatively, school districts should be authorized to designate another district owned building within the appropriate boundaries for the election in which polling would take place.

The concerns of superintendents over mandating school buildings to host general, primary and special elections is solely based in concerns over student safety. We understand and respect that policymakers have concerns that allowing school buildings to reject their polling place designation could harm voter turnout. We respect these concerns and will work with policymakers to ensure no voter is disenfranchised if a school districts declines its designation as a polling place.

In the aftermath of the horrifying attacks in Newtown and Parkland, parents across the state have demanded that schools take significant and sometimes costly actions to ensure all students are kept out of harm's way. Schools have heeded these requests, but their ability to meet the full demands of parents and the community is hindered by the current polling place law.

We urge the Legislature to act this session to allow schools to maintain full control over who can enter school buildings when students are present.

THE COUNCIL strongly supports authorizing schools to decline to be designated as a polling location.