



Spotlight On...

Safeguarding the Right to Vote in the Great City Schools¹

Council of the Great City Schools

As the 2020 presidential election nears, there are legitimate concerns about the safety of students, teachers, staff, and visitors in school facilities used as polling places. Despite the risks involved, school buildings play an important role in ensuring access to in-person voting. In 2014, the Presidential Commission on Election Administration recommended school buildings as the best sites for polling places because they have ample, desirable space, and are inexpensive, widely available, conveniently situated, and accessible for people with disabilities. “With almost no exception, the testimony received from state and local election administrators identified schools as the preferred venue for polling places.” In the 2012 presidential election, about one third of voters cast their ballots in schools.

Districts will face a number of options on November 3. Some districts that have already reopened schools may opt to make the facilities available on election day, but keep students, teachers, and staff away from campuses. Others may designate November 3 as a staff-only or “in-service” day, allowing them to remove students from the equation while providing teachers with professional training and allowing administrators to perform administrative functions. In other cases, districts will face the challenge of maintaining the safety and security of students and school staff who are present on election day, as well as the community members using the schools to vote.

Recommendations for Reducing Safety Risks on Election Day

While threat levels from COVID-19 and other issues that have surfaced during a heated presidential campaign may vary from community to community, there are a number of specific steps all school districts should consider taking to provide secure school sites and reduce safety risks on election day. These steps include, but are not limited to—

- District administrators and school safety and security personnel should meet prior to election day with their elections board administrators to discuss safety and security issues and guidelines for poll workers and poll operations. School officials should provide guidelines for the use of their facilities and site-specific information on assigned voting locations that election board administrators can distribute to election supervisors and polling place leaders in advance of the election.
- Building administrators and facility/custodial managers should meet with on-site elections supervisors upon their arrival to review school-specific polling locations, parking procedures, designated ingress and egress locations, emergency communications systems and protocols, and related information.
- Schools should restrict election voting to one location or area of the school that has its own entrances and exits so election staff and voters can enter and leave the designated voting area without going through other parts of the school building.
- If the school site is to remain open for students and school staff, voters should be required to park on the streets around the school if this is logistically possible based upon its location and design. If parking on campus is the only option for election staff and voters, parking areas separate from staff and student parking should be designated with clearly marked signage, preferably parking closest to the entrance to the designated voting area.

¹ The Council of the Great City Schools deeply appreciates the leadership and guidance provided by the National School Safety and Security Services, a national school safety consulting firm based in Cleveland (Ohio), whose public school district is a Council member.



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- Voter entrances and exits from the school building should be clearly marked with signage, and doors not authorized for voter access should be clearly marked and direct voters to the appropriate entrances for their use.
- For schools that are in session, re-evaluate transportation drop-off and pick-up points used by school buses and parents to lessen congested areas and consider—
 - Increasing the amount of supervision in parking lots and transportation areas, utilizing school administrators and staff throughout the school day—particularly during student arrival and dismissal times. *Any use of municipal and district police patrols, school security staff, and School Resource Officers (SROs) should be used in accordance with local laws and with special consideration of historical concerns around voter suppression.
 - Providing protocols and training to bus drivers for managing their transportation operations on election days; and reminding and encouraging them to maintain a heightened awareness at bus drop-off and pick-up areas, on streets around schools, and elsewhere on their assigned routes.
- Ensure there is two-way communications capability (telephones, two-way radio, and/or cell phones) in the voting area so polling workers and school staff have the immediate ability to call for assistance if needed.
- Designate an isolation room in the immediate voting area for emergency use if a case of COVID-19 is identified among voters or election polling staff so they cannot pass throughout the building.
- Review incident action or school emergency plans and related guidelines so procedures can be activated if a real emergency associated with the election required lockdowns, evacuations, or additional steps to secure a building.
- Increase the presence of municipal and district police patrols, school security staff, and School Resource Officers (SROs) in and around schools, both during and after regular school hours and for the entirety of the time that polls remain open. Importantly, elections board administrators and school district officials should discuss and clearly define areas of responsibilities and costs to be assumed by municipal police patrols and district security staff.
- Review security procedures with staff, students, and parents and stress the need for heightened vigilance and awareness on election day. Ensure that all stakeholders clearly understand what actions are permitted in accordance with election supervisors, as well as state and local laws. Remind everyone: ***If you see something, say something.***
- Use existing surveillance cameras and associated security technology, if available, to monitor parking lots, entrances, exits, hallways, and related areas leading to the voting areas.
- Conduct regular patrols/checks of building perimeters and grounds before the opening of school and throughout the day for suspicious items or persons and other unusual or disruptive activity.
- Thoroughly clean the polling areas according to COVID-19 guidelines immediately after the balloting to ensure that they are safe for reuse as school space.

The Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation's largest urban public schools, advocates the value of the democratic process and respects the right and responsibility of Americans to vote. Since schools are a significant part of the community, the Council believes it is appropriate they are used as election day polling places even with the many new challenges facing the safety of election staff, voters, students, and district staff in this pandemic.



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Robert Carlson, *Director of Management*

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Council of the Great City Schools
1331 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W.
Suite 1100N
Washington, D.C. 20004