Election Reform – Designation of Polling Places

The New York State School Boards Association appreciates the intent of legislation which seeks to increase New Yorkers’ access to the polls. However, certain reforms such as early voting will have a direct impact on many school districts and their students across the state.

While some New Yorkers head to firehouses, town halls and churches on election days, others enter school buildings to cast their votes. Under current law, if a local board of elections designates a school as a polling place, the district must make space available to serve as a polling place.

The use of school buildings as polling places is concerning for many school districts. This practice extends far beyond general election day, to include primaries and special elections. On these days, members of the public may have unfettered access to school buildings and their students unless the district closes the building. This compromises student safety and causes disruptions to academic programs.

At a time when school districts are hardening their entrances and increasing security, it is distressing to think that they may be required to increase the number of days they are required to set aside security procedures and allow unrestricted access to their buildings.

While some districts choose to close schools during voting, it is not feasible for all districts to do so. School districts face increasing pressure when developing their school calendars and are penalized financially if they have fewer than 180 days of instruction between September 1 and regents rating day in June. Many districts have great diversity in their school communities and need to close for an increasing number of religious holidays. Moreover, if special elections occur, they may be set after the school calendar is set for the year and cannot be planned for in the school calendar.

For these reasons, NYSSBA urges additional election reform legislation that would address the issue of providing school districts the right to refuse the designation as a polling place.

For additional information, please contact NYSSBA Governmental Relations at 518-783-0200.