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P.S. 116 PTA Co-President
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City Council Meeting
on the implementation of early voting

I am testifying on behalf of the New York City public school students and families at P.S. 116, some as young as three years old, whose safety and education was jeopardized during the recent early voting in schools. *The primary function of schools is to provide a safe and effective learning environment for children.* To be clear, we support early voting. However, commandeering schools for early voting interferes with our children's safety and disrupts their education.

Given the epidemic of school violence, New York City public schools require all adults to show identification to enter schools. We are outraged that this necessary safety precaution needed to be suspended to accommodate early voting. Any unidentified person off the street was able to enter the school unchallenged and walk the hallways as children made their way to their classrooms and bathrooms. Any person claiming to need handicap accessibility was walking down the hallways where we our pre-k classrooms are. Any person could have walked into that hallway.

What is our administration to do when a child runs out of his or her classroom and can't immediately be located in the building? Protocol requires them to close all entrances and exits. There are horror stories about what can happen when young children flee a school building and immediate action is not taken. A school administration must act quickly when young children's lives are at stake. How can they do that when during early voting all doors must remain open?

Addressing the safety concerns led to interference with the students' education. In an effort to keep the students separate from the general public, students did not have access to their gym for physical education and after-school classes, to their cafeteria for breakfast and lunch, or to their school yard for recess. Arrival and dismissal needed to be completely rearranged. The children were sequestered in their classroom all day, every day for five days. The attention it took for school administration and staff to reorganize schedules and systems is time taken away from their attention to educating our children. This is a fact. We saw it firsthand.

We invited the Manhattan BOE Commissioners to do a walk-through of our school building with us. They must not have realized the safety implications here or the disruption to learning that would take place. They explained that they had already walked through our school numerous times.

To me, this implies it was not that they didn't realize, it is that they do not care.

During the NYS Senate Hearing when Senator Galef questioned Todd Valentine, Co-Executive Director of the BOE, about the safety concerns of using schools as early voting sites, Mr. Valentine's answer is that there is always a police officer at the site. In our school, that police office is down in the basement through the cafeteria and inside the gym. In any school, that officer is next to the polling machines, not at the entrance to the building. If people enter our school with ill intent, they are not only entering directly into that gymnasium. They are also entering into the first floor where our youngest children are. They are entering into a hallway with numerous stairwells that lead up into the rest of the school building.

Robert Brehm, Co-Executive Director of the BOE, mentioned that the BOE actually keeps a record of all the people who sign in to vote as if this fact should put parents at ease. How is that list relevant after a tragedy has occurred? And, why does he assume that the perpetrator will ever actually make it into the voting room to sign in?

Mr. Brehm also mentioned that there is a process by which schools or the administrations overseeing schools can call the Commissioners to request that a different choice be made. It was also said at the hearing that sites were selected in May. We have been told by the Department of Education that they were not notified until September 24th. How is it possible then to do as Mr. Brehm suggests when the schools weren't notified with any advance notice? How is that possible to do when no one calls you back?

Perhaps communicating with Commissioners is a realistic option for facilities like the Javits Center which had plenty of advance notice and the support from the Governor's Office to call Mr. Brehm and Mr. Valentine directly. Who is calling on behalf of our children?

This gap between what is perceived to be happening by the BOE and what is actually happening to and in the schools is making it very difficult to actually protect the interests of our children. *It is diverting people's attention away from what is true – that the city and state government officials here in NY are placing voting needs ahead of the safety and education of our children.*

As we all know, no school buildings in Queens and only one school building in all of New York State outside of the city were selected for early voting, while thirty three schools were selected among Manhattan, Bronx, Staten Island, and Brooklyn. Is it absolutely necessary that public school buildings in our boroughs be used for early voting? Why would we take such an unfathomable risk? If the BOE, in conjunction with the local government officials, can manage everywhere else in the state, can't they figure it out for us too?

In fact, if you allow early voting to continue in schools, our children's safety and education will be compromised for at least three weeks during 2020. There will be a minimum of three elections held in New York City, and the week of early voting during April 2020 will coincide with the New York State math test required for students in grades 3 - 8. I saw firsthand the stress on a school when it is housing early voting. Our children should not suffer the effects of that stress or distraction on top of the pressure already surrounding State standardized tests.

We are here today because the New York City government officials we rely on to protect and advocate for our children have failed us. Fortunately, we avoided a tragedy in our schools during early voting this time. It would be senseless to take this risk again.

You are on the front lines between all the government agencies involved in making these decisions. We need you to know the city and state buildings (Libraries, Veteran Halls, Town Halls, Fraternal Organizations, Colleges) as well as tax exempt buildings, in your districts that can be used instead of schools. We need your support in communicating that schools should not be used just because the cost is free. There cannot be a price put on the education and safety of our NYC public school children.

Thank you for very much for giving me time to speak today.