

Schools say safety compromised on Election Day

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School officials say students are safe and sound behind locked doors 175 days every year.

But on one or two days, anyone with a voter registration card can enter those buildings - potentially putting students at risk, officials say.

While state law requires public schools to open their doors as Election Day polling places, some suburban school officials question whether it's worth the risk.

"Schools have a real concern because we have a responsibility to our students that the building will be safe," said John Benedetti, superintendent of Grant High School District 124 in Fox Lake. "But we also have a responsibility to be open to voters."

Some school leaders in Cook, Lake, McHenry, Kane and DuPage counties are seeking changes.



Emmons Elementary in Antioch was one of a number of schools that served as a polling place for the spring election. State law requires public schools to open their doors as polling places, but educators are concerned about safety. (Vincent Pierri/vpierri@dailyherald.com)

Antioch Elementary District 34 officials sent a letter asking the Lake County clerk to remove their buildings as polling places. Officials at District 124 in Lake County and Crystal Lake Elementary District 47 in McHenry County said they want to meet with their county clerks to explore options.

Districts in Kildeer, Wheeling Township, Des Plaines and elsewhere don't hold classes on election days.

That option has caught the attention of several state legislators - including state Rep. JoAnn Osmond of Antioch - who are reviewing legislation to create a mandatory day off for students on election days. Osmond said that would ensure safety isn't compromised.

Caught in the middle of the debate are county clerks, who say removing school buildings as polling places could hamper the election process.

"We cannot do our job without schools," Lake County Clerk Willard Helander said. "They are the mainstays of the voting process in the county."

School buildings make up more than half of the polling places in Cook County. Officials in Lake and McHenry counties say about a third of their polling locations are in schools. In DuPage and Kane counties, officials say the number is less than one quarter.

Schools are not paid to serve as polling places.

Schools have been used as polling places for decades because they are public facilities and centrally located. They also are large enough to accommodate a stream of voters throughout the day.

The tragedy at Columbine High School and other cases of school violence prompted increased security measures at schools. Officials say those measures conflict with the access a polling place requires.

For example, architects designed strict security measures for Grant High School in Fox Lake when the building was renovated four years ago. Anyone entering the building once classes begin for the day is required to pass through the front office and sign in.

Voters bypass those security measures on Election Day, walking through the front door and into main hallways students use. More than 700 entered Grant to vote Nov. 7.

School districts are aware of the conflict. Grant stations a janitor at the door to keep an eye on voters as they come and go. Crystal Lake District 47 Superintendent Ron Miller said his district hired police officers Nov. 6 to be at the schools used as polling places.

Parents also are speaking out.

John Corbett, superintendent of Wood Dale Elementary District 7, said principals at two schools used as polling places received angry calls from parents upset the public could walk in without being checked.

"Any day of the year, I have to be buzzed in (to enter the school), but on Election Day, the doors are open to the world," Corbett said the callers would say. "And they were right. This is a big issue."

Security and crowding are at the root of Antioch District 34's request to be removed as a polling place.

"We already use 16 mobile classrooms for extra space," Superintendent Scott B. Thompson said. "We also have parking issues because of our overcrowding, and it becomes worse on voting days."

Emerging as the most popular solution is not holding classes on Election Day.

Cook County Clerk David Orr said his office urges districts to do that to offset security and space issues, and free up teachers for election judge duty.

"Schools are essential as polling places, but we want the kids to be safe, and we need enough room to be used as a polling place," Orr said. "I would love to harness the talent of teachers and administrators as election judges, so the best way to handle this is to hold a non-attendance day. It solves most if not all the problems."

Some state legislators like the idea.

"Honestly, there are not a lot of logical places for an election to be held besides in schools," said Osmond, who represents the 61st House District. "But, there are safety concerns. It's something we definitely need to look into."

If her office drafts such a bill, it wouldn't be heard for the first time at the state level until February.

Other officials say there has to be a better solution.

"We aren't here to take days off, and there has to be other ways to do things besides making it a non-attendance day," Benedetti said. "The clerk's office could sit down with local governments and come up with alternatives to this problem that are more convenient and conducive to elections. Taking a day off just defeats this purpose."

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