

Hosting polling places seen as a security risk because of public access

Port Washington voters will cast their ballots at regular polling places in schools as they have for decades during next week's Feb. 19 primary and the April general election, but then voting in school buildings will end because of security concerns following the Newtown, Conn., school shootings.

Port Washington-Saukville School District officials who have long embraced voting in schools as the ultimate civics lesson for students and an opportunity for the public to visit schools have now decided that allowing essentially unchecked access to two of its buildings on election days is just too risky.

With plans in place to accommodate voting at Thomas Jefferson Middle School and Dunwiddie Elementary School in the immediate future and with no fall election, the City of Port Washington has until next year to find new polling places, but school officials have requested a police presence at school polling places next week.

The April 2 general election doesn't pose a problem because students will be on spring break.

Changing local attitudes about access to school buildings are a reflection of a growing national concern for student safety that began with the Columbine High School shootings on April 20, 1999, and entrenched by the Dec. 14, 2012, massacre at Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Conn.

"Having polling places in schools is a great learning experience for students," Supt. Michael Weber said last month. "Students are able to witness people exercising their right to vote and taking part in a national event. That said, we believe we can't allow voting in schools to continue as it does now."

A School Board committee recommended that voting in schools be discontinued for security reasons.

"We live in changing times," Weber said this week. "We have to adapt in a thoughtful and logical way."

The problem for school officials is that significant security measures undertaken four years ago, which are being tightened now, must be waived for elections. Providing unfettered access to the polls conflicts with the school district's efforts to control access to schools, officials said.

In 2007-08, the district installed an automatic locking system at Port Washington High School

PW-S District to end voting in schools after April election

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and the middle school, and protocols were established at elementary schools to ensure that all doors to buildings except the main entrances are secured while students are in class.

By the end of this month, security will become even tighter with the installation of so-called buzzer systems at the three elementary schools. Main entrances will be locked, and visitors will have to request access using a buzzer and intercom system. A video camera will allow school staff members to see who is requesting access. Over the summer, the district plans to reconstruct elementary school entrances to create secure vestibules where visitors will wait in a protected area before being allowed into buildings.

The same security concerns don't exist at the high school and middle school because, unlike at the district's other buildings, visitors enter through the main office and cannot go elsewhere in the building until being checked in.

For city officials, replacing two of its three polling places will be a challenge. Schools are ideal since they are large enough to accommodate voters and accessible to people with handicaps.

City Administrator Mark Grams said City Hall, the only polling place that is not in a school, is not nearly large enough to accommodate all voters in the city, so two new locations will need to be found. Those polling places must be reviewed by the state, he said.

"The good news is that we have plenty of time," Grams said.