

Election Day School Security and Safety

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Many schools are Election Day polling places. School safety concerns have caused many schools to have staff-only days on Election Day. But many schools have students present on Election Day. How can schools reduce Election Day school security concerns?

Election Day School Security: An Expectation of Safety

While school and community officials typically continue to make their schools available for election day voting, there is also a reasonable expectation for maintaining the safety and security of students and school staff, as well as the community members using the schools on election day. Although practices of years past often allowed schools to be more open and relaxed on election day, safety threats in a post-Columbine and post-9/11 world have increasingly raised concerns with many school administrators, school staff, and parents about the vulnerability of their schools when schools are thrust open to use by any legitimate voter from the broader designated school community. While the threat level may vary school to school, community to community, and perhaps even election to election, school and community officials must take reasonable safety and security measures into account.

Reducing School Security Risks on Election Voting Days

Wide open doors and facilities, limited (if any) supervision, and leaving the school on “auto pilot” during election day simply are not options in today’s society. Our educators work hard throughout the school year to reduce access to school grounds and buildings, and they cannot summarily dismiss school security on any one given school day deemed as election day in a school community. Although we cannot prevent every potential crime and act of violence, our school, election, and community officials should explore ways to reduce safety risks and to provide a secure school site on election day.

Often schools designate election day as a “professional development” day for staff training only with no students in attendance in their districts. However, while this has been done more since the late 1990 spate of school shootings, the majority of schools continue to provide regular educational services on election days. Some specific steps schools can consider to address election day security risks include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- School district administrators and safety 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 consider providing district guidelines for use of their facilities and site-specific information on assigned voting locations in advance of the actual elections. Elections officials should provide this information to on-site elections supervisors/polling place leaders so they have it prior to the day they report on-site at the school for election day.

- 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 for the election day. Ideally this location will have its own entrance and exit for ingress and egress, thereby requiring voters to enter and leave the designated voting area without going through the rest of the school building. Many schools use their gymnasium, for example, which has doors where voters can enter and exit without going into the rest of the school. Student classes normally held in the gym are relocated elsewhere in the building for that day.
- If at all possible, voter parking should be off-campus to reduce the number of vehicles parking on the school grounds and near the building. Schools should encourage parking on the streets around the school if this is logistically possible based upon the school's location and design. If parking on campus is the only option for voters, establish designated parking areas specifically for voters, preferably parking closest to the entrance to the designated voting area. Designated parking areas for voters should be clearly marked with signage.
- High schools where students drive to school each day may wish to consider encouraging student parking off campus on election days in order to reduce the number of cars on campus and to enhance visibility and supervision of overall parking lots. While this may present a one-day inconvenience to students, this option could be an extra risk-reduction strategy depending upon each specific school's parking situation, physical layout, and school-community dynamics. At a minimum, voter parking should be separate from student and staff parking, if at all possible.
- Provide clear signage for voter entrances and exits. Provide signage on secured doors not authorized for voter access to direct voters to the appropriate entrances for their use.
- Examine transportation drop-off and pick-up points used by school buses and parents to assess traffic patterns and potential conflicts with voter traffic. Reassign these locations to less congested areas of the school for the one election day, if necessary and logistically possible, should the voter traffic conflict with regular school transportation logistics. Strong consideration should be given to providing and/or increasing the amount of supervision in parking lots and transportation areas by school security personnel, School Resource Officers (SROs), and/or school administrators and staff throughout the school day and, during student arrival and dismissal times. Bus drivers should be given protocols and training related to managing their transportation operations on election days, and they should be reminded and encouraged to maintain a heightened awareness at bus drop-off and pick-up areas, on streets around schools, and elsewhere during their travels.
- Provide two-way communications capabilities (telephones, two-way radio, and/or cell phones) in the voting area so polling workers and/or school staff have immediate communications capabilities to call for assistance if needed.
- If necessary, designate a restroom in the immediate voting room area for emergency use by voters. Avoid situations where voters have to walk throughout the building if they need to use restroom facilities if at all possible.

- Review school emergency plans for lockdowns, evacuations, and related guidelines prior to election day. Assess how the presence of polling operations would be impacted by the implementation of these procedures in a real emergency and what additional steps would need to be taken during the activation of such plans to secure polling areas.
- Provide an increased presence of school security staff, School Resource Officers (SROs), and/or police patrols in and around schools, including the time from the opening to the closing of the polls before and after regular school hours.
- Educate staff, students, and parents about election day security procedures and the need for heightened awareness ahead of time. Brief school staff the day before the election on specific heightened security procedures and the need for staff to be extra vigilant and highly visible on election day.
- Use existing surveillance cameras and associated security technology to monitor parking lots, entrances and exits, and related areas of concern. While using cameras in the voting room itself may be inappropriate, existing cameras covering the parking areas, entrances and exits, and hallways leading to the voting area should be functional and employed as a support to overall security strategies.
- Conduct regular patrols/checks of building perimeter and grounds before the opening of school and throughout the day for suspicious items or persons and other unusual or disruptive activity.