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New York State Senate Testimony
on the implementation of early voting

My name is Erica Rand Silverman and I am a parent and PTA Co-President at P.S. 116 elementary school in Manhattan. I am testifying on behalf of the New York City public school students and families at our school, some as young as three years old, whose safety and education was jeopardized during the recent early voting period. Thank you for inviting me here today to speak. I would like to begin by saying that we support and value early voting. However, commandeering schools for early voting interferes with our children's safety and disrupts their education.

New York City public schools require all adults to show identification to enter schools. Sadly, we all know why this is. This necessary safety precaution was completely suspended to comply with early voting. Any unidentified person off the street was able to enter the school unchallenged and walk through our hallways as children made their way to their classrooms and bathrooms. Any person who needed or claimed to need handicap accessibility walked down our hallway lined with pre-k rooms.

Addressing these safety concerns led to interference with the students' education. In an effort to assuage parent's worries and keep the students separate from the general public, students did not have access to their gym for physical education and after-school classes (our only gym was the polling site), to their cafeteria for breakfast, lunch and after school (the cafeteria is directly linked to the gymnasium), or to their school yard for recess or after school (this is where the voters entered the school from). Our only three common spaces were completely off limits. The children were sequestered in their classroom all day, every day, for five days.

This infringement on our children's education and security must never happen again.

We invited the Manhattan BOE Commissioners to do a walkthrough 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 have already walked through our school numerous times.

So, it is not that they didn't realize then, it is that they did not see any cause for concern.

I hope you're hearing this testimony now and feel concern and I hope you're thinking that the building of P.S. 116 is clearly not conducive to house an early voting polling site. What is

important here to emphasize, is that the BOE Commissioners though selected us anyway, because they could. And, there is nothing in the election law to protect our school from being selected again. There is nothing in the law to protect the other schools who are here from the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Staten Island to be selected again. In fact, the way the election law is written, it works against us. There is no way to protect our children's right to their education and safe learning environment.

This concern has been raised by public schools and Senators all year in anticipation of early voting. It ended up that no school buildings in Queens and only one school building in all of New York State were selected for early voting, while thirty-three schools were selected among Manhattan, Bronx, Staten Island, and Brooklyn. Why are we taking such an unfathomable risk in New York City? If BOE can manage everywhere else in the state to keep early voting out of schools, can't they manage it in our boroughs as well?

As you know, next year there will be three elections in New York City (and a fourth in Queens) and twenty-seven days of early voting. Twenty-seven days of early voting should be a reason to celebrate but for us it's a nightmare. That is at least three weeks of worry and disruptions and risk to our children's lives. Additionally, the April 2020 election 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. It is encouraging that as of yesterday, the Mayor has pledged to keep early voting out of schools. While we appreciate his pledge, good intentions are not a guarantee. Who is to say that the next Mayor will feel the same? Fortunately, we avoided a tragedy in our schools during early voting this time. It would be senseless to take this risk again. We are asking you to safeguard our children and their education by amending the election law so that we can have a guarantee that early voting will never be held in schools while school is in session again.