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STATEMENT REGARDING THE USE OF SCHOOLS FOR VOTING

Submitted by Mark Donovan, Superintendent of Schools

July 23, 2012

I have been asked to write a statement regarding the impact of having our schools serve as polling places. At the outset, I want to make it clear that the School Department stands ready to continue to help out with city elections in any way we can.

On the positive side, there are some advantages to having citizens vote in our schools. Voting allows the general public to spend some time in our buildings and get at least a glimpse of what's going on in our schools. We also have many parents who vote as they drop their children off in the morning or as they pick up their children at the end of the day, making voting convenient for them. Another advantage is that voting in our schools provides a teachable moment that allows our teachers to discuss the role that citizens play in a democracy.

The negative side of this issue involves some real concerns on a practical level. The primary concern involves traffic. Many people prefer to vote on their way into work in the morning. This time often coincides with the student arrival time at school. In many cases, traffic around schools is difficult on a non-election day. Election day brings increased concerns about additional vehicular and pedestrian traffic, limited parking, and added confusion as citizens unfamiliar with the schools' drop-off procedures attempt to navigate around the property. A few years ago, we had a case where an elderly driver drove his car down a walkway intended for students.

Another negative aspect of voting is that it takes place in a gym, library, or cafeteria thereby affecting either the school program or the lunch program for that day. Schedules are disrupted, and students may be denied access to programs and facilities to accommodate voting.

A recurring concern of parents is that strangers are coming into the school environment where their children are present. Prior to almost every election, I receive phone calls from parents wanting to know what safety measures are being taken to ensure the safety of children. No matter how reassuring I am, the fear remains for some people.

On balance, from my perspective, the negative aspects of voting outweigh the positive ones. Of course, voting in schools has been happening for many, many years, and we have always been able to accommodate the needs of the city. However, I would encourage the city to explore alternatives to the current voting arrangement.