

9 August 2021

NY State Senate Committee on Elections
Westchester Public Hearing
Westchester County Center
198 Central Avenue
White Plains, NY 10606

Dear Committee Members,

Many thanks for conducting today's hearing to solicit testimony on proposed reforms to the voting process and operations of New York State county boards of elections.

I submit the following written account of my experiences as a resident of Pelham Manor, and as a candidate campaign co-chair during our district's 2021 Board of Education (BOE) election. I focus on 3 areas of concern that I ask your Committee to consider for further examination and reform: **1) the rise of partisan influence and tactics** that threaten the traditional non-partisan nature of school board elections; **2) candidate and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) misconduct** that created inequities among candidates and that violated long standing norms sanctioned by NYS PTA guidance; and **3) lack of effective oversight and support to districts** to ensure full and transparent voting on election day.

The rise of partisan influence and tactics in BOE elections. During the Pelham Union Free School District's (PUFSD) 2021 BOE election, partisan polarization was endemic at many levels.

- One candidate was (and continues to be) a paid employee of a staunch conservative/alt-right think tank (and holds appointments with other similar groups). **The partisan nature of his professional work sits in stark contradiction to the NYS PTA guidance on BOE candidate qualifications.**
- Two candidates' spouses and an elected Village Trustee, aided by the Pelham Republican Party Chair, engaged in widespread ballot harvesting - collecting over 100 ballots and "assisting" in their completion. An initial review of documents based on a FOIL request indicates instances of possible voter signature falsification and issuing of ballots to one family of voters who applied using an address of a property at which they no longer reside. **While ballot harvesting is technically legal in NY State, it is ethically questionable and legislative attempts to make it illegal should be passed immediately.**
- The Republican Party Chair and close associates led and participated in an email and phone tree, to put forward a racially-charged and misogynistic defamation campaign against another candidate using contact information obtained from a community-based organization. **The NY State Senate Elections Committee should issue guidance to all political parties that these kinds of activities are unacceptable, and possibly harmful to the physical security of candidates and the entire electoral process itself.**

Candidate and PTA misconduct. Absent effective oversight, the 2021 PUFSD BOE campaign was marred by actions that should have been identified and prevented to ensure an equal and level playing field among all candidates.

- During the campaign, two candidates engaged in the widespread dissemination of misinformation and disinformation specifically designed to feed polarization among the community, and discredit other candidates.
- One candidate and his family's elementary school PTA willfully violated previously agreed upon PTA Council rules for BOE candidate forums, resulting in the creation of inequities among the other candidates and a favorable platform for himself. **The NY State Senate Elections Committee should clarify standards of conduct and penalties for misconduct for all BOE candidates, PTAs, etc., to ensure fair and equal treatment standards are upheld.**

Effective election day oversight and support. Where partisanship takes hold in a BOE election, it carries implications for election day.

- Once the full extent of partisan ballot harvesting was discovered, there was no redress available to ensure that absentee voter signatures could be assessed/verified during ballot counting once the polls closed.
- There was no mechanism available to permit poll watchers to observe the voting process.
- It was not clear that the signatures of in-person voters were validated in a fair and equitable manner during the voting process. When I voted, for example, my signature was reviewed only by one volunteer. **More robust county-level assistance and oversight to districts that are experiencing heightened levels of partisanship should be available to ensure that BOE election results are fair and accurate.**

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to share my experiences with the PUFSD's 2021 BOE election process.

Sincerely,

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