2020-2021

Virtual Elections: Guidance for PA/PTAs and Presidents' Councils

In the Spring of 2020, the Office of Family and Community Empowerment (FACE) issued Functioning in the Virtual Environment: Guidance for PA/PTAs and Presidents' Councils. That document focused on shifting from in-person to virtual meetings and on pressing financial matters; it did not offer guidance on holding elections pending the resolution of questions regarding the mechanics of candidate/voter verification and voting on a virtual platform.

As a follow-up, we are now providing step-by-step guidance on how to conduct elections in a virtual environment. As with the previously issued guidance, FACE has worked closely with CPAC and will offer trainings to FLCs, FSCs and Parent Coordinators on implementing the guidance. Therefore, we encourage PA/PTAs to seek advice and clarification from their district-based supports, particularly their FLC and Presidents' Council. It should be understood that, although only PA/PTAs are explicitly referenced in this document, Presidents' Councils should use this guidance both to advise PA/PTAs and to conduct their own elections.

Organizing the Election Meeting

PA/PTAs that did not complete their annual elections before June 30, 2020 have until October 31, 2020 to elect at least the three mandatory officers (president, recording secretary and treasurer). Elections for the parent representatives on the SLT should be held at the same time to ensure a functioning SLT. It is useful to remember that only the terms of the mandatory officers (president, recording secretary and treasurer) have been extended by waiver, and only if they have children enrolled at the school after June 30, 2020. Therefore, at the start of school, many PA/PTAs will have only one or two officers, most will not have a full executive board, and some will have no officers.

Nominating Committee or Expedited Election?

CR A-660 requires that the PA/PTA bylaws specify rules for the annual (spring) election, including the formation of a nominating committee. However, we recommend that elections conducted after June 30, 2020 pursuant to the waiver be held as expedited elections—*i.e.*, with all nominations taken from the floor—as provided for the fall elections in CR A-660:

Expedited elections are required to fill mandatory officer vacancies that cannot be filled by succession,… and to re-establish PA/PTAs that have ceased to function. (CR A-660.I.D.10)

- If a PA/PTA has not been able to keep any of the three mandatory officers (president, recording secretary and treasurer) in place under the term extension granted by the waiver, it must hold expedited elections because it will have ceased to function.

- If a PA/PTA has at least one mandatory officer in place, it will not have ceased to function, but should still hold expedited elections because it will be filling one or more mandatory officer vacancies.

- PA/PTAs that have been able to keep all three mandatory officers in place could in theory treat these elections as delayed spring elections and form a nominating committee that would run a normal annual election. We do not recommend this option due to the short timeline.
  - Nominating committees are usually formed by April 1 and have a couple of months to solicit nominations and organize the election. The timeline (less than six weeks between the start of school and October 31) makes it very unlikely that a nominating committee can be formed and organize the elections in compliance with the bylaws (CR A-660 does not cover nominating committees).

School Leadership Team (SLT) Elections

CR A-660 requires that elections for parent representatives on the SLT be held after PA/PTA officer elections in order to give more parents the opportunity to run for these seats. We recommend that they be held as part of the same meeting to ensure that they will be completed, and parents fully represented on the SLT by October 31.

Choosing a Meeting Date and Platform

The date of the election and voting platform should be discussed and decided at a general membership meeting. A special meeting may be called if the date set in the bylaws for the regular monthly meeting does not allow enough time to plan and implement the election by October 31.

- Example: A PTA waited for the start of school to hold its first meeting. Its bylaws set the monthly meeting for the third Thursday of the month, so it must wait until October 15 to hold its first regularly scheduled meeting. A special meeting should be called as soon as possible after school re-opens because this schedule leaves too little time to ensure elections are completed by the October 31 deadline.
  - Notice for special meetings may be as little as 48 hours, although a longer period is advisable for this meeting.

Our recommendations for voting platforms can be found on p. 5 of this Guidance.

Notice of Election Meeting

The rules set forth in CR A-660 regarding the timing and content of the election meeting notice must be followed; however, PA/PTAs that normally rely on backpacking and posting notices at the school will need to adapt the methods of distribution to ensure that all parents are notified.

- Drafting the notice. CR A-660 specifies that the PA/PTA executive board is responsible for creating the notice and submitting it to the principal/parent coordinator in time for it to be distributed at least 10 calendar days before the election meeting.

The notice must include:

- o Date, time, and location of the election.
  - The location will be the link to the virtual meeting.
- o A list of all positions to be filled.
  - Include SLT positions if the SLT elections will be held at the same meeting, and a statement that these positions will be voted on after the results of the PA/PTA officer positions have been announced.
- o A statement that the only qualification for all offices is that the candidate be a parent of a child in the school.
- o A statement that all nominations will be taken from the floor at the election meeting.
- o Term limits, if they are included in the bylaws.
- o Date that notification was distributed to all parents and means of distribution.

- Distributing the notice. Because only the school has full contact information for all parents, PA/PTAs will need to work with the parent coordinator to ensure the notice is distributed to all their members at least 10 days before the election meeting. If the school does not have a parent coordinator, the principal (or the Unit Coordinator for D75 sites) will be responsible for distributing the notice.
  - o Schools should use any/all applicable communication channels to provide families with notice regarding the PA/PTA election, including email, robocalls, texts messages, etc. If a parent does not have an email address on record with the school, other methods of contact should be used to ensure that the parent is aware of the meeting and election.
  - o Schools must document the date and method of distribution in the event an election grievance is filed.

What if a PA/PTA Has no Officers at the Start of School?

If a PA/PTA has no mandatory officers at the start of school, it will have ceased to function and the principal is responsible for reestablishing it:

If the PA/PTA has ceased to function, the principal must convene a meeting of parents where an expedited election will be held to re- establish the PA/PTA. (CR A-660.I.B.3)

Steps to Take Prior to the Virtual Election

Many PA/PTAs have held virtual meetings over the summer and have become comfortable with a particular platform, which may or may not be suitable to use for a virtual election. As soon as school starts, or even before if possible, PA/PTAs should review the current platform or choose another one that can support a voting process that complies with the requirements of CR A-660.

PA/PTAs must also work with the principal or principal's designee (usually the parent coordinator) to ensure there will be a candidate and voter verification process in place for the election.

Choosing a Virtual Election Platform

Several platforms are suitable for conducting business during PA/PTA meetings, including voting on motions. For elections, however, some platforms are less desirable because key features—waiting room, co-hosting, audio and text recording, polling and break-out rooms, dial-in—are either not available or are only available with a paid subscription.
We strongly recommend PA/PTAs use DOE-supported accounts so that they are able to access the necessary premium features without cost to them. Zoom is the preferred platform because it is easy to use and feature-rich; Google Meet and Teams each have some drawbacks but may be good alternatives for PA/PTAs that have already become familiar with them.

- To set up an account under the DOE's central account, PA/PTAs will need to establish a schools.nyc.gov email address. Every PA/PTA is entitled and strongly encouraged to do business through an official DOE email account; if one hasn't been established yet, you will need to ask your principal or Family Leadership Coordinator (FLC) to request one from DIIT. If you have not been able to set up a DOE email account through your principal of FLC, contact FACE for assistance.
    - Unlike Gmail and similar accounts, a DOE email address belongs to the PA/PTA and anything that is sent through it will remain available even if the password is lost because it can be reset by DIIT.

- Once a DOE Zoom, Google Meet or Teams account has been set up, the various features should be tested by holding mock meetings and elections—the more you practice, the more smoothly your meetings will run.

Verifying Candidates and Voters

CR A-660 requires the principal or designee (who must be a school employee, usually the parent coordinator) to verify the eligibility of each participant (candidates and voters) in a PA/PTA election. This is normally done by the principal/designee checking parents against the school's list as they enter the meeting.

Determining eligibility is challenging in the virtual environment, since there is no way of telling with any certainty who is and who isn't a PA/PTA member either by controlling access to the meeting (since anyone with the link can sign in) or by visual confirmation (you may not recognize the face be able to associate the name/email address/device name they are using to sign into the meeting with a member).

We recommend that schools verify eligible candidates and voters by creating an individualized code for each parent, to be used to sign into the election meeting as described below.

- This could be a randomly generated number, or a combination that is easier for the parent to remember, such as: school DBN + class/homeroom number + last 4 Digits of OSIS number (example: 04M037-701-4199). Schools can use their discretion to identify a method for generating a unique code for each parent.

- The code should be generated and emailed to all parents well in advance of the meeting, along with instructions on how to use it when joining the meeting. In certain cases, it may be necessary to provide the code by phone as well.
    - The principal/designee should have the list of codes available at the meeting in case a parent needs their code to sign into the meeting.

Virtual Election Platform Recommendations

Zoom

FACE has tested the Zoom platform and recommends it for elections based on the following functionalities:

- Ability to transfer hosting and have more than one host. This is important because it allows members to share the various tasks of running the meeting and elections: the meeting chair can focus on recognizing speakers (unmute/mute) and screen sharing; other members can manage the waiting room, the chat and polling.

- Registration function with an option for custom questions and waiting room. This is important in controlling participants in the actual voting and minimizing the risk of an election being overturned on the grounds that ineligible persons were able to vote.
    - Registration can be accomplished quickly and easily even during the meeting as long as "registration required" is checked when the meeting is set up and the "admit automatically" option is checked.
        - Checking the "admit manually" option or requiring advance registration is not advisable—they complicate the process of signing into the meeting without improving identification for the purpose of voting.
        - If the meeting is set up with "registration required," attendance will be automatically recorded and a report can be downloaded by the host/account owner after the meeting. There will be no need to create a separate sign-in

sheet or ask participants to type their name in the chat (this latter option is not advisable in any event)

- o Both because PA/PTA meetings must be open to the public and because it is impossible to control the distribution of the meeting link, eligible voters should be identified on the platform by their unique code rather than by their name/email address/device name, etc. This can be accomplished in one of two ways:
    - Creating a custom question that enables participants to use their unique code as an identifier when setting up the meeting (this can be done only if "registration required" is checked); or
    - Requiring participants to rename themselves with their unique code as they enter the meeting.
- o As participants enter the waiting room, eligible voters are identified by their code; others may be admitted but should be removed from the meeting or put into a breakout room at voting time (they may be re-admitted later).

- A chat feature that can be used in addition to/instead of raised hand to ask questions or make comments.
    - o The chat may be used for voting on motions, but it is not suitable for elections since voting cannot be anonymous.
        - Exception: the chat may be used to vote on an uncontested position since that is done by motion.
    - o The chat is automatically recorded and saved on the host/account owner computer.

- A polling feature that can be used for voting. This feature is available only on the desktop version of Zoom, so the host/account owner must use a computer although everyone else can participate through their IOS or Android mobile app or a phone.
    - o After nominations close, the host/account owner must create a separate poll for each contested position, with the names of all candidates.
        - No poll is needed for uncontested positions. A motion to accept the candidate is made, seconded and voted on. Each uncontested position must be voted on separately.
    - o The poll must be set to "anonymous" to prevent codes/names/email addresses from appearing on the screen or in the polling report.
    - o To make sure only eligible voters cast a ballot, others should be removed (temporarily) from the meeting as described above.
    - o NOTE: The host cannot vote. After the poll is created, hosting must be transferred to someone who is not a member of the PA/PTA. This may a member of the Presidents' Council, the FLC, or a FACE representative.
        - Hosting should not be transferred to the principal or parent coordinator.

    ○ A polling report should be downloaded after the meeting and saved by the host/account owner. This will be the record of the election since there will be no ballots that can be saved and re-counted if the results are questioned.

Google Meet and Microsoft Teams

Google Meet and Microsoft Teams are DOE-supported platforms for meetings but lack certain features (e.g., multiple hosts, registration/renaming participants, raise hand, polling as part of the platform) that are needed to run a smooth election.
For these reasons, FACE has not tested these platforms extensively, focusing instead on Zoom.
PA/PTAs that wish to use Google Meet or Teams should practice with mock elections and ensure that the features listed above are available or a work-around can be found.

Online Voting Platforms

It is important to understand that Zoom, Google Meet and Teams are virtual meeting, not virtual election, platforms. While they can be used for elections, the requirements for PA/PTA elections mandated by CR A-660 (candidate and voter verification, secret ballot) make it difficult to use them without lots of practice and some work-arounds.

Several companies offer actual online voting platforms; unfortunately, we have not found any that are free. While FACE does not recommend PA/PTAs use a platform they must pay for, some PA/PTAs may choose to do so in order to save the time, effort and uncertainties associated with adapting a virtual meeting platform to election needs.

The following companies offer online voting platforms at various pricing levels; some offer discounts to schools: Election Buddy; Election Runner; Simply Voting; eBallot.

- Please note that FACE has not tested and is not endorsing any of these companies--this list is only a starting point for PA/PTAs that have decided to pay for an online election platform.

- If the cost of the platform exceeds the amount available to the executive board under the emergency expenditure provision in the bylaws, it must be voted on by the membership.
  - Because the use of an online voting platform may have drawbacks beyond cost, the safest course is for the membership to vote on it in any event.

Holding the Virtual Election

The guidelines for holding a virtual meeting apply equally to meetings that include elections. We encourage PA/PTAs to review those guidelines and also consider how to implement the additional

requirements applicable to elections. Practicing by holding mock election meetings will be key to success.

- An election chair must be named as soon as the meeting is opened by the presiding officer (normally, the president) and quorum established.
    - CR A-660 sets the quorum for PA/PTA meetings at 8 members, including at least 2 executive board and 6 parent members. If the PA/PTA has too few officers, the quorum requirement may be met with 8 parents (as allowed for meetings to re-establish a PA/PTA).

- The election chair must be someone who is not running for office. Ideally, it should be a member of the PA/PTA, but because of various challenges associated with holding virtual meetings and elections, outside assistance may be needed to run the meeting efficiently.
    - A member of the Presidents' Council, the FLC, or a FACE representative may be asked to assist.
        - Asking the principal or parent coordinator to assist may open the election to complaints that school officials interfered with the PA/PTA election process, which is explicitly prohibited by CR A-660.

- The election chair should explain the process as for a regular election (positions up for election; opening and closing of nominations; candidate speeches; voting) as well as special rules needed to ensure the integrity of the virtual election.
    - Sign-in sheet: If the meeting has been set up with registration required, there will be no need for a sign-in sheet because the list of participants can be downloaded by the host/account owner; otherwise, someone should be assigned to record participants' names.
    - Voter (and candidate) verification: To ensure that only eligible voters cast ballots, their unique code must be visible to the election chair and they must be the only participants in the meeting at the voting stage.
        - Participants can be instructed to add their unique code to their first name when registering; that is the way they will appear in the list of participants (example: Jane 04M037-701-4199).
        - Participants can be asked to rename themselves with their unique code as they enter the meeting. This method is time-consuming and not always effective but must be made available in case participants missed the registration instructions or the Zoom meeting has not been set to "registration required."
        - As the codes appear on the list of meeting participants, the principal/designee must check them against the previously compiled list of eligible voters.
        - Parents who dial into the meeting may be verified by asking them to state their school-issued unique code, which the principal/designee will check against the

list. If it is not possible to rename these participants, the election chair must keep track of the phone numbers that represent eligible voters.

- o To ensure that only eligible persons cast votes, the meeting host must remove all participants without a code (or the verified phone number) from the meeting or move them to a break-out room at the time of voting. This is the virtual equivalent of distributing ballots only to verified voters.

- After nominations close, the candidates' names will be announced, and the host/account owner can set up a poll for each position.
  - o THE "ANONYMOUS" BOX MUST BE CHECKED DURING SET-UP TO PREVENT TRACING VOTES TO INDIVIDUALS. If the poll is not set to "anonymous," the host/account owner will be able to see how each unique code voted.
    - It is recommended that the election chair confirm and announce that the poll has been set correctly.
  - o If the host/account owner is a PA/PTA member, hosting will have to be transferred to someone who is not (e.g., the FLC) so that the member can vote.
  - o The length of time the poll will remain open should be stated before voting starts and a timekeeper appointed.
  - o Special arrangements will have to be made for parents who dial in since they will not be able to participate in the poll. A potential solution is to in effect run a separate election in a break-out room and add those votes to the results of the poll.
    - The host in the break-out room will ask each phone participant for their unique code and their vote; the vote is recorded in the chat for transparency, but without the code.   After all the votes have been cast, they can be tallied in the chat and the results reported out.
      - Since voices may be recognized, this method does not guarantee an anonymous vote.

- The election chair should read aloud the results of each poll—the votes cast for each candidate and the winner—slowly and clearly so that they can be accurately captured in the meeting recording.
  - o Poll reports and recordings are deleted by Zoom after 30-60 days. We recommend that the election chair take a screenshot/photo of each poll, and/or type the results in the chat or a Word document that can be shared on the screen and saved. This will ensure there is a back-up in case the host/account owner does not download the poll report before it is deleted.

Don't Forget to …

- Record the meeting.
  - The recording may be useful to reconstruct events if grievances are filed.
  - You should announce that the meeting is being recorded as a matter of courtesy, but consent is not needed to proceed.

- Ensure you have co-hosts who can help run the meeting, especially if you anticipate high attendance. Virtual meetings have more moving parts than in-person meetings and are harder to run single-handedly.

- Make sure you set up the meeting properly so that the features you need operate as expected. The best way to ensure a successful meeting and election is to practice beforehand.
  - Practice with participants dialing in as well as joining by computer, tablet or smartphone. Separate instructions will have to be provided to make sure those who dial in are verified and able to vote.

- Make arrangements for language access.
  - Zoom breakout rooms may be used for interpretation, but a separate Teams meeting may have to be set up for parents who join by phone.

Certifying the Election

The principal is required to certify that the election was conducted in accordance with CR A-660 and the PA/PTA's bylaws. The principal may appoint a designee, who must be a school employee other than the parent coordinator.

After the election, the newly elected mandatory officers and SLT representatives must provide their contact information to the principal for the Election Certification Form. This may be done by having the officers email the information to the principal/designee; each officer could also fill out the form separately and email it to the principal, who will then compile the information into a single form.