

Plainfield's costly plan to change school election again



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Officials say change of election date meant to avoid politics, but critics say decision is itself political.

The Plainfield Board of Education voted to move elections back to April. (Photo: ~File)



Story Highlights

- Plainfield took advantage of new law in 2012 to move school elections to November.
- Board of Education decided to move elections back to April next year.
- Mayor Adrian Mapp criticized the decision as a "slap in the face."

[PLAINFIELD](#) - Like almost all districts in the state, this city three years ago moved its annual school board election to November.

But last month, without fanfare or debate, the Board of Education here moved the election back to April — the only district in Union County to do so.

The move could come with a high cost — as much as \$115,000 a year, according to a preliminary estimate by the city clerk.

It also has sparked a new clash in an increasingly combative relationship between the school district and Mayor Adrian Mapp. Unlike other communities where unopposed school board candidates or ballots with zero candidates are the norm, Plainfield often sees fierce school board campaigns, with the warring factions of the local Democratic Party fielding as many as three different slates for control of the district's \$187.5 million budget.

"It's very sad that members of the Board of Education would take money out of the classroom to pursue an agenda that is not in the best interest of the city and an agenda that amounts to disenfranchisement," Mapp said Wednesday, slamming the shift back to April.

"This move is certainly a slap in the face of the citizens of Plainfield who stand a much better chance of participating in the process in the election than they will in April."

School board and budget elections traditionally had been held on the third Tuesday of April.

That changed in 2012, when a law signed by Gov. Chris Christie allowed school boards, municipal governing bodies or a citizens' petition to move their elections to November for a period of four years. The move also took away the ability to vote on school budgets as long as districts kept spending increases under 2 percent.

Since then, an overwhelming majority of districts have moved elections to November. The Plainfield election was moved as a result of a City Council resolution, which was protested by school board members.

Advocates for November elections say that too few people bothered to vote in April, allowing some school districts to sneak through tax increases.

Supporters of the April contests, on the other hand, say the highly partisan federal, state or city races in November overshadow school issues and candidates while injecting party politics into what are supposed to be nonpartisan races. On November ballots, the school board candidates do not appear in the columns reserved for the political parties, but that doesn't stop the parties from endorsing school candidates on campaign literature.

Plainfield school board member David Rutherford believes that a higher turnout in November does not guarantee more informed voters.

"The Democratic Party headquarters and party resources have been used to openly promote these board candidates, the very practice that April Board of Education elections were there to prevent," Rutherford [said this month on his website in an essay explaining his vote to bring back April elections](#). One of three incumbents Rutherford supported in November, Jackie Coley, lost to the sole challenger backed by Mapp, Emily Morgan.

"April elections give citizens a fighting chance against the party chairs, their vast resources, and their inherent proximity to candidates for state and national office."

But Councilwoman Rebecca Williams, a Mapp ally, [took to her own website to decry the decision](#), posting an email [she received last week from City Clerk Abubakar Jalloh](#) estimating the six-figure cost for moving the election. The estimate is more than triple what the district had spent years ago because it no longer will be able to share the county's election expenses with other districts.

"That \$115,000 could go to a lot of other stuff for our kids. Again, there has been no rationale given for changing the BOE election date back to April, other than the perceived idea that somehow 'politics' would not be a part of it," Williams wrote, adding that the move is "imprudent and morally unacceptable."

School board President Wilma Campbell did not return a request for comment Monday.

The mayor's criticism closely follows another confrontation with the school district. Last month, Mapp authorized an automated call to city residents in which a woman speaker criticized Schools Superintendent Anna Belin-Pyles for canceling a citywide youth event that had been scheduled for mid-November.



The blog of resident Dan Damon, an erstwhile Mapp campaign operative, characterized the cancellation as [“retribution”](#) by school board members Wilma and John Campbell in response to Mapp [ordering the City Hall not to authorize](#) their son John Campbell Jr.’s campaign event at Leland Park the Sunday before the November election. Campbell ran as an independent against an incumbent councilman backed by Mapp.

In an interview with MyCentralJersey.com last month,

Plainfield Schools Superintendent Anna Belin-Pyles said a robo-call authorized by Mayor Adrian Mapp was “libel” against her. (Photo: ~File)

Wilma Campbell denied that was the motivation. At a recent City Council meeting, Belin-Pyles explained that she had asked the city to postpone the event as a result of the district making a [mid-year decision to change high school schedules](#), which the board approved at a special Saturday meeting Oct. 31.

Belin-Pyles said the automated call was “a personal attack against my character and reputation” and “misuse of city equipment and resources.”

Mapp maintains that Belin-Pyles abruptly canceled the event citing her “executive decision” as the only reason.

Last week, Mapp insisted there “is no friction” between him and school leaders, all of whom in recent years shared a common animus toward Assemblyman Jerry Green, whom Mapp replaced as the city’s Democratic chairman this year.

“If the school district does something that is not in the best interests of the students, not in the best interests of the city, I will express my opinion and hope it will weigh heavily on those in the decision-making process,” Mapp said.

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