LOWER HUDSON EDUCATION COALITION
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Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224

Re: Support for A4683/S6737, S2589/A5301, and S3735/A5302

Dear Governor Hochul:

On behalf of the Lower Hudson Education Coalition (LHEC), which is a consortium of public-school districts in Dutchess, Rockland, Orange, Putnam, and Westchester counties educating nearly 300,000 students, I write to urge your approval of **A4683 (Paulin)/S6737 (Fahy)**, **A5301 (Woerner)/S2589 (Mayer)**, and **A5302 (Woerner)/S3735 (Mayer)**, which were delivered to your office for Executive Action. Taken together, these bills make thoughtful, practical improvements to the way school districts govern themselves and conduct elections, and they do so in a way that is fiscally responsible, respectful of local control, and deeply aligned with New York's commitment to strong public education.

In our region, school board and budget elections are at the heart of local democracy. Each year, voters are asked to decide on budgets that determine class sizes, staffing levels, program offerings, building safety, and long-term investments in facilities. They select board members who set policy, oversee superintendents, and represent the voices of families and taxpayers. These decisions are often made in close elections where a few hundred votes—or fewer—can alter the course of a district for years. At the same time, Lower Hudson districts operate in a complex environment with year-round programs, intensive special education and transportation needs, working families with demanding schedules, and communities that have seen firsthand the impact of severe weather, power outages, and other emergencies on school operations.

Modernizing Organizational Meetings – A4683 (Paulin)/S6737 (Fahy)

This legislation responds to a longstanding concern of school leaders by modernizing the rules around annual organizational meetings of boards of education. Current law ties districts to rigid dates that frequently conflict with graduations, summer school, religious observances, and the practical realities of onboarding new board members. As a result, districts are often forced to choose between strict compliance with outdated timelines and the need to hold meetings at times that are accessible to families and workable for board members and staff. By allowing boards to hold their organizational meeting on any date on or before the Monday after July 20, and by repealing conflicting provisions in existing law, this bill provides a clear, reasonable window in which districts can plan thoughtfully. It allows them to schedule leadership transitions after new members have received training and orientation, to avoid conflicts with major school and community events, and to ensure the public can meaningfully participate. This change costs the state nothing, but it significantly improves the way boards organize themselves at the start of each school year.

Protecting Voter Access Through Absentee Ballots – A5301 (Woerner)/S2589 (Mayer)

This bill addresses another practical challenge that our districts see every election cycle: confusion about who may receive an absentee ballot in school district elections, particularly in communities that do not use poll registration. Unlike general elections, school district elections operate under a separate section of law, and the rules governing absentee eligibility have not always been clear to voters or even to local officials. The consequences are serious. Seniors, people with disabilities, caregivers, and residents whose work or health situations prevent them from appearing at the polls on a single day can find themselves unsure of their rights or, worse, turned away

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because of ambiguity in the statute. By clarifying the permissible reasons for obtaining an absentee ballot in these school elections and aligning them with the broader framework of New York's voting laws, this bill helps ensure that eligible voters are not disenfranchised by technicalities. It supports consistent practices across districts, reinforces public confidence that school elections are fair and accessible, and reflects the state's broader movement toward expanding secure, lawful voting options.

Ensuring Fair Elections During Disasters – A5302 (Woerner)/S3735 (Mayer)

S3735/A5302 speaks directly to an experience that has become all too familiar in the Lower Hudson Valley: the disruption of critical civic events by disasters and emergencies. Our districts have endured severe storms, flooding, power failures, and other events that can close buildings, block roads, and suppress turnout on the very day voters are scheduled to approve a budget or elect a board. Under current Education Law, there is no clear, tailored remedy when an election is substantially affected by such events. Districts and the State Education Department are left to navigate uncharted territory, which can invite confusion, legal risk, and public mistrust of the results.

This bill provides a measured, responsible solution. It authorizes the Commissioner of Education to declare that a disaster has substantially impacted a school board or school budget election and, in those circumstances, to permit the district to hold an additional day of voting when turnout has fallen below a specified threshold as a direct result of that disaster. This authority is narrow and targeted: it is not a license to rerun elections for ordinary reasons, but a safeguard for those rare but consequential situations when circumstances beyond anyone's control prevent voters from safely or reasonably participating. By creating a clear pathway in law, the bill protects both the integrity of school elections and the legitimacy of their outcomes, ensuring that budgets and board members are chosen by a representative electorate rather than by the accident of a storm or outage.

Viewed together, these three bills form a coherent, forward-looking package. A4683/S6737 modernizes governance by giving districts flexibility to conduct organizational meetings in a way that works for their communities. S2589/A5301 strengthens voter access and equity by eliminating ambiguity around absentee ballots in school elections. S3735/A5302 ensures that when disaster strikes, there is a fair and orderly way to preserve the voice of the community in school decision-making.

For the Lower Hudson Education Coalition, these changes are not abstract. They will help our member districts plan leadership transitions more effectively, ensure that homebound or otherwise constrained voters can participate in school elections with confidence, and protect communities from seeing critical votes undermined by emergencies that no one can control. In a time when trust in institutions is under strain, strengthening these basic democratic processes at the local level is both prudent and necessary.

For all of these reasons, we respectfully and strongly urge you to sign A4683/S6737, S2589/A5301, and S3735/A5302. Your approval will provide school districts across New York State with practical tools to govern more effectively and to ensure that the voices of students, families, and taxpayers are heard clearly in the decisions that shape our public schools.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued leadership on behalf of New York's children and communities.