

Poll: Churches Should Be Allowed to Meet in Public Schools

Two-thirds of Americans believe public schools should rent to churches and other community groups, according to a new study by LifeWay Research.

The study comes as a Feb. 12 deadline **banning use of New York City schools by churches** approaches. Up to 160 NYC congregations that have used school buildings for worship services in the last year will be directly affected by the ban, which can be reversed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Bloomberg has taken no such action to date.

The study found that 65 percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement, “public schools should rent to churches and other community groups,” while 16 percent responded that schools “should rent to other community groups but not churches.” Additionally, 12 percent believe “public schools should not rent to any churches or community groups.” There is also 1 percent who believe “public schools should rent to churches but not other community groups” and 7 percent are “not sure.”

However, half of the subset of New York state residents hold that **public schools should rent to churches**, (49 percent) indicating they believe “public schools should rent to churches and other community groups.” In contrast, 27 percent believe “public schools should rent to other community groups but not to churches.” Nineteen percent indicate “public schools should not rent to any churches or community groups” while one percent said they should rent only to churches. Four percent are “not sure.” The New York State sample included 123 respondents and the sample was not large enough to break out

New York City residents.

New York City department of education officials implemented the ban in December following the Supreme Court's refusal to review a lower court's backing of the city's position. The reactions to the January survey were in response to the question: "New York City is no longer allowing churches to rent space in any public schools out of concern that a school would be identified with one particular religious belief or practice. Which of the following statements best describes your opinion?"

LifeWay Research President Ed Stetzer said the ban has considerable implications for churches in urban contexts and new start-up congregations.

"Historically schools have been welcoming locations to churches, especially in larger urban centers where schools are in the heart of the communities," he said. "A trend of banning church use of public schools could have significant implications."

According to the study, there are several statistically significant differences between subgroups of Americans. Americans who live in a large city are less supportive of church and community group use of public schools, with 21 percent saying "public schools should rent to other community groups, but not churches."

There is some variation in responses between Americans with and without a college degree in relation to the survey. Those with a college degree are more likely to support (68 percent and 63 percent respectively) public schools renting to churches and other community groups.

Interestingly, men are more likely than women to select "public schools should rent to churches and other community groups" (72 percent to 58 percent), and less likely to select "public schools should rent to other community groups, but not

churches" (12 percent to 19 percent).

Not surprisingly, Americans who "never" attend a **worship service** are the least likely (32 percent) to select "public schools should rent to churches and other community groups" and the most likely (39 percent) to select "public schools should rent to other community groups, but not churches."

The study found Republicans (84 percent) are the most likely to select "public schools should rent to churches and other community groups" while Democrats (47 percent) are the least likely, with Independents (67 percent) falling between the two parties.

Democrats (32 percent) are the most likely to select "public schools should rent to other community groups, but not churches," while Republicans (2 percent) are the least likely with Independents (10 percent) falling between the two parties.

Republicans (8 percent) are the least likely to select "public schools should not rent to any churches or community groups."