



House Elections Committee
Representative Kahrs, Chair
Sub. S.B. 171 Elections; polling places; unified school districts

Written testimony Diane Gjerstad
Wichita Public Schools
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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

The Wichita Public Schools Board of Education adopted a resolution on February 9, 2015 urging the Legislature to not change school board election dates or nonpartisan status of school board elections.

The current system of non-partisan elected leadership has served Kansas school districts well. School issues, student issues are best addressed in a non-partisan fashion to address a community's goals.

Board Members are sworn to office in July which coincides with a new school year, new teacher contracts, new programs, and changes in programs for a new school year. Board members start the new school year along with students and staff.

Moving the election to November and taking office in January would put new Board members in the midst of contract negotiations with inadequate time to become acquainted with practices and concerns facing the district. Districts begin the negotiations process and the budget process in January. This bill would put new Board members in the difficult role of evaluating budgets with little time to become acquainted with the district's priorities and business practices.

School facility use and calendar

School districts are in the education business. Districts are organized to maximize student outcomes working within the constraints of time, state and federal mandates and budgets. The bill would allow an election officer the ability to unilaterally change the school

facility use and calendar, without agreement or even consultation of the locally elected Board of Education.

While the change to 365-day notice is better than the original bill, we believe one unit of government should not have the unilateral authority to appropriate another government's facilities without collaboration and mutual agreement.

The school calendar is constructed to optimize learning time for students, high quality professional development for faculty, instructional requirements and assessment schedules. In-service days are placed at the end or beginning of the week because experience proves when days off are placed mid week, some students will stretch the weekend into a longer holiday and miss school. In-coming Education Commissioner Randy Watson, recently identified student attendance as one of the best predictors of student success. Unfortunately chronic absenteeism (over ten percent) continues to be a factor for some. This bill would require in-service on election days when the election officer single-handily decides to use a school as a polling location, experience tells us absenteeism will increase.

At the high school level families are encouraged to coordinate college visits with Friday or Monday in-services. This schedule allows families extended time to visit colleges without missing class. Allowing the election official to change the school calendar and shift in-services to mid-week would have an educational impact on schools.

The primary election would fall during enrollment for some districts. Some school buildings, especially elementary schools, may not have adequate space to accommodate separate locations for both enrollment and polling. The decision whether to use schools as polling locations should not be the exclusive right of the election officer.

The Sedgwick County election officer made the decision over ten years ago to move polling sites away from schools. We remain oppose to the bill's provisions allowing another governmental body to dictate use of a school facility and alter the school calendar one-sidedly, without collaboration or agreement of the elected Board of Education charged with the education of their students.

Mr. Chairman, the current system for non-partisan, school board elections in the spring serves our communities well. We would encourage the committee to not advance the bill.