

Written Testimony

Presented to the Senate Standing Committee on Ethics and Elections

On

Senate Bill 171

By Glennis Zimmerman, South Haven, KS

Senator Holmes, and Honorable Members of the Committee,

I appreciate the opportunity to provide written testimony concerning SB 171. I write in opposition to this bill. I serve on the Board of Education of South Haven USD 509 in south central Kansas, and this year am the board president. Our school district is a small 1A district serving 180 students. South Haven is the only community in our district, and the school is the heart of our community. I have three grandchildren attending South Haven Schools, and three of our four children graduated from that school. My husband served on the BOE for 20 years, and his father also served on the BOE in that district. I give you that history so that I may refer to it.

My first objection to this bill is that it moves school board, and other local elections, to November of even-numbered years and has elected officials take office in January. This year we have five positions open on the school board, four regularly elected positions, and one position because of a resignation on the board during the first two years of a four-year term. It would be possible to have five brand-new board members taking their seats in January, a month when we regularly evaluate the superintendent. I do not believe that these brand-new board members could adequately evaluate a superintendent having just been seated on the board. Many times new board members come to the table with misunderstandings of why things are done the way they are in a district, It takes some months for new board members to “learn the ropes” and understand how governance on a school board works. The current system of April elections and taking office July 1 allows new board members to gain an understanding of issues before making important personnel decisions, etc.

Having the elections in November also takes focus away from school board and other local elections. These elections are very small in stature compared to the national and state elections they would be slated with. Consequently, they would receive less attention when slated with these other elections. School board members in small districts like ours generally do not campaign, and if there is a campaign, the focus is on stance on issues. With the current elections cycle, this focus is preserved and not lost in the many campaigns leading to November even-year elections. I also believe this will disenfranchise those unaffiliated voters from voting in the primary that may be needed. These voters are unaffiliated for a reason, and with current Kansas law, would have to affiliate to vote. What does it gain them to do that?

Second, I object to school board and other local elections being partisan. School boards are focused on what is good for the students in the district where they serve. That is as it should be. Divisions are based on issues of policy, and not on party politics. I see the divisions in the legislature this year, and I do not want that for boards of education. Boards need to come together to solve problems and improve student success in their districts. My husband, who served on the South Haven BOE for 20 years, could

not have served on that board if the elections became partisan. He was a civilian employee of the federal government at McConnell AFB in Wichita. Federal employees cannot run or hold office in partisan elections. Making elections partisan effectively disenfranchises a section of our population from serving their communities as school board members, city government leaders, etc.

Our South Haven Board of Education certainly does not agree on all issues. At times I find myself the lone yes or no vote on an issue. However, we as board members focus on our school and its needs, and not what a political party ideology might be, as we make decisions to improve student success.

Third, I do not believe that every school district needs to schedule an inservice on Election Day so that the school can be used as a polling place. In our community, we have ample space to hold elections without using the school. However, I grew up in a community where the school was used as a polling place. I remember watching adults coming in to our elementary school to vote, and thinking how important a duty it must be that people actually took time away from work to vote. Schools can make voting work in their buildings, and it is good for students to see democracy in action. They would not be there to see that if a mandated teacher inservice took place instead.

I write this testimony as a citizen, and do not claim to represent our board of education. However, I can say that at our board meeting Monday, February 9, the board unanimously passed a resolution in opposition to SB 171.

I would propose that there are other options to increasing participation in local elections, if that is the concern of those who introduced this bill. I regularly advance vote by mail ballot, because of the convenience and because I never know, as a farmer's wife, what I may be doing on election day. I believe that election of all local officials by mail ballot would improve voter turnout and address my concerns about ballot length etc. This also would not require a change of date of local elections. If mail ballots are not an option that the committee wants to consider, perhaps spring elections could be moved to a Saturday, when people are generally off work. That would certainly be true in our district, where many of our patrons commute to Wichita for their employment.

My three grandchildren are the reason I ran for the Board of Education when I retired. I want them to have the best possible public school education they can have. I want them to have a group of teachers and administrators that are focused on their success. And I want for them a Board of Education who understand that their task as elected officials is to make sure that student success is supported at all levels. Today people run for boards of education because they care about kids and their districts. Our students are the most important products this state produces. They deserve the best board members possible. I do not want partisan politics to get in the way of that important task and good people not to run for the board because they are federal employees, as my husband was, or do not want to declare a party affiliation.

Thank you for reading my written testimony. Should you have any questions I may answer after you read this testimony, I would be happy to answer them. My email address is glennis.zimmerman@gmail.com and my phone number is 620-892-5538. Thank you again.

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