

February 11, 2015

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Ethics and Elections

SB 171 – Elections; municipalities and special districts; spring to fall; other changes.

Chairman Holmes and Members of the Committee:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today. I am speaking in opposition to SB 171. I had the honor of serving for 12 years as a member of the Board of Education of Topeka Public Schools, USD 501. I consider service by elected school board members to be one of the most impactful and meaningful ways in which concerned citizens can positively shape their community and, by extension, the State of Kansas, for generations to come. School board members voluntarily bring their unique abilities to the board and serve alongside their fellow patrons, school administrators, staff and teachers as a team to help make their local schools the best they can be. The ability to serve my local school district in an atmosphere of non-partisanship and with the ability to represent the east side of the district were two significant reasons for me to first run for a seat on the school board in 2001. The changes to the method of election of school board members as required by SB 171 would be detrimental to attracting citizens to school board service.

School board service, by nature, transcends commitment to a political party, and by requiring school board elections to be on a partisan basis, board candidates and members could be forced to choose between allegiance to a political party and what is best for the students of their district. Serving on a school board without remuneration and without regard to a political party is what helps make board service personally rewarding. School board members must be free to do their important work without being concerned about the pressure of a political platform or agenda and whether they have the blessings of a political party. They must be able to make their decisions based on what they feel is the best for the education of the students in their local community.

Kansas' local government election system was implemented by design. Classes for USD 501 students begin in August and end in May. That schedule is aligned with the local school board budget process, which relies on the State budget process, which is typically finalized in late Spring, followed by the assessed property valuations performed by the County in June. Our current local election cycle effectively falls in line with the school's fiscal and academic year.

The Topeka Public Schools Board of Education has adopted a public position in support of the current local election system. I applaud your interest in increasing voter turnout in local elections, however there are unintended consequences that will actually minimize the voters' ability to determine their best choice for school board candidate. I would urge the committee to focus on ways to enhance and improve the local election process by looking for ways to help locals engage and educate voters, as well as ensure that they participate in their local

government by voting.

As a former school board member, I cannot emphasize enough the need for local autonomy and community control. I believe that the requirements of SB 171 would be a significant detriment to the continuance of the high quality of service presently provided to their patrons by the dedicated school board members in the State of Kansas. Therefore, I respectfully ask that you vote no on SB 171.

Thank you very much for your consideration.