House Committee on Elections
on
Substitute for SB 171 – An act concerning elections and voting

Testimony in Opposition
by
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Mr. Chair, Mr. Vice-Chair, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Committee on **Substitute for SB 171.** This bill makes numerous changes to local elections in Kansas, including moving the election date for school board elections from April of odd-numbered years to November of odd-numbered years. It would also have school board members take office on the second Monday in January, rather than July 1 each year.

I strongly urge you to reject the provisions of SB 171 as they pertain to school districts, and maintain spring, non-partisan school board elections, for the following reasons:

- **The current April election cycle and July 1 starting date for school board terms coincides with the beginning of our fiscal year and with the school year calendar, thus supporting the efficient and effective functioning of our school board and operation of our district.**

Under the current election cycle, newly-elected school board members are able to fully participate in all the important decision making that occurs at the beginning of our fiscal year and before the school year begins in August. These vital processes include approval of the annual budget and, in our district, our goal-setting process, which guides a large portion of our agenda throughout the school year. Moving elections to November and shifting the start date of school board terms to mid-January would mean that a newly-elected board member would not be

allowed to vote on the budget that governs the district for most of the first year of the board member's term, nor would new board members participate at all in setting the goals that govern our district's work throughout the year.

Moreover, a board member beginning a term in mid-January would have practically no experience or knowledge on which to base his or her evaluation of the superintendent, the process for which typically begins at the beginning of January. The same holds true for participation in negotiations, which begins February 1.

These missed experiences will do tangible harm to efficient and effective policy-making processes in our school district, given that every two years the potential exists to have three or four new board members, out of a total of seven, take office.

- **Having school board elections in April of odd-numbered years allows voters to focus on those policy issues unique to the community at the local level.**

Each community has unique needs, and state policy toward local elections should allow communities to meet these unique needs. There is a great deal of value in allowing voters to focus solely on local issues in April elections. This is particularly true for school board elections; March primary elections and April general elections occur during a time of year when those voters most closely affected by these elections-- parents of our students-- are likely to be engaged in the issues, able to readily register to vote, and available to cast their ballots.

Under the original version of SB 171, these elections would be moved to November of even-numbered years. I urge the committee to maintain the Senate's position rejecting that proposed change. Please remember that school board members serve in their positions *without pay*. Requiring them to run a campaign at the same time as federal, statewide, and state house and senate legislative elections will result in increased cost of such campaigns and a monumental increase in the difficulty of effectively communicating with voters about those issues that are most salient to

school districts. We have all experienced the flood of campaign advertising that happens during the November election season in even-numbered years--how can a local school board candidate even begin to compete with the millions of dollars spent on campaign advertising in those races? It simply is not possible.

Increasing voter turnout has been cited as a reason for moving elections to November--yet, given the certainty that school board candidates' messages will be completely drowned out during the November election cycle, what value will be added for the voter? Voters will pay less attention to the specific issues in school board races--which are often very specific to the community and unique from any other elected position on the ballot--thus canceling out the purported benefit of increased voter turnout.

In January 2015, Lawrence Public Schools completed a mail-ballot election in favor of maintaining our increase in the local option budget. *We had 33% voter turnout for a mail-ballot election held in mid-January*. Perhaps the answer to increased voter turnout is not to move school board elections to November, but to consider alternative ways to conduct such elections, like mail ballots, that would increase voter turnout while neither damaging the business and operations of public schools, nor prohibiting participation on school boards by good, caring, highly-qualified citizens.

- **Turning School Board Elections into Partisan Elections Will Impair the Efficient and Effective Operations of Local Boards of Education**

Finally, I am deeply concerned that the original version of SB 171 required school board elections to become partisan elections. I urge the committee to maintain the Senate's decision to delete this provision from the bill. Introducing partisan politics to school board elections has two harmful effects. First, our district's goals of Excellence, Equity, and Engagement are not partisan goals. They are what we strive to achieve for all students in Lawrence Public Schools and, frankly, what any school board member should strive to achieve through his or her service on a

school board. Not once during my four years of service on the board have we had a discussion where an "R" or a "D" behind my name would have told voters anything meaningful about how I would vote on an important issue. Partisanship will be nothing more than a distraction and hindrance to our focus on doing what is best for our students.

Second, partisan elections would prohibit an important sector of our school community from ever serving on our local school board. Partisan elections will prevent military servicemembers and most federal government employees from holding this office. While our local board does not currently have a member this would impact, these school community members should not be prohibited from participating in the governance of our public schools.

For all of these reasons, I implore this committee to reject the changes to school board elections outlined in Substitute for SB 171**. Non-partisan, spring elections serve our community and our public schools well, and while the desire to increase voter participation is commendable, this bill will do substantial harm to school district operations while actually decreasing voter engagement in and understanding of the issues that are vital to successful public schools.**

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Shannon Kimball

President, Board of Education, Lawrence Public Schools USD 497