

Testimony in Support of Passing SB171
Democracy in Local Government Depends on Voter Turnout
by
Dr. Walt Chappell, Former Member of State Board of Education

If America is to remain strong, we must protect and encourage people to vote. Without voter participation, we have no representative democracy—of, by and for the people.

Low voter turnout in Kansas Spring elections for city councils and local school boards allows special interest groups and crony capitalists to control billions of tax dollars. Those elected do not represent the vast majority of citizens who live in their city or attend their schools.

Here are some examples. **In Sedgwick County, only 6.2% of the 247,302 registered voters cast ballots in the April 2, 2013 general election.** The four people elected to the Valley Center City Council received only 40, 34, 36, and 83 votes respectively out of a city population of 6,965 people.

The turnout was no better in Wichita. There were four seats open on the City Council. But, there were only 1,553, 926, 1,795 and 1,106 votes cast for each candidate who won. **This is just 6.4% of the registered voters as compared to 67.3% who voted in November 2012.**

The 6.25% was just as bad for Wichita School Board. Two candidates ran unopposed but only received 7,573 and 7,699 respectively. The other two received just 4,654 and 2,922 each.

After being elected, the Wichita City Council approved a \$577,877,808 million dollar budget for 2015-16. The USD259 Wichita school board adopted a \$683.8 million dollar budget for 2015-16—which included a \$40 million dollar increase instead of providing the property tax relief intended by the State Legislature.

Once the legislature appropriates funds for schools, there is little accountability on how over \$6.1 billion per year is spent by local school boards. The amount spent to educate Kansas K-12 students has doubled since 1998. Our state is now 4th highest in America on the percent of State General Funds appropriated to educate our children yet test scores have not improved.

Holding elections in April, with low voter turnout, requires newly elected school board members and city council people to make hasty and often uninformed budget decisions. They do not take office until July 1st. But, by then, most budget decisions have already been made and they are forced to “rubber stamp” what the city manager or local school district superintendent wants them to approve.

If Kansas is ever going to go back to representative democracy, we must make it possible for more registered voters to participate. This means holding elections for all local, county, state and national offices in November of even years. Then is when voters are paying attention, have a strong reason to vote and will turn out in larger numbers.

Our democracy will be stronger and more cost/effective decisions will be made about how to spend taxpayer money once SB171 is passed into law.

Respectfully submitted,



Walt Chappell, Ph.D., President
Educational Management Consultants
(316)838-7900 / educationalmanagers@cox.net