



MEADE

Unified School District #226
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February 10, 2015

To: Senate Ethics and Elections Committee

Re: SB 171 – Local Elections

First of all I appreciate the opportunity to address the committee regarding SB 171. Secondly, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Kenneth Harshberger. I am a lifelong farmer from southwest Kansas, a teacher for 10 years, a principal for 18 years, and I have been the superintendent for Meade USD 226 for the last six years. My passion for rural Kansas and having several daughters serving as educators helps provide me with a unique perspective of our local communities.

While allowing our students throughout Kansas to participate locally in the voting process is commendable, much of this bill undercuts many of the important values we hold dear to Kansas as it relates to the local control of elections.

- First and foremost SB 171 undermines the values of our communities if local elections are allowed to become partisan. Simply look at our state and national elections this fall or during many other years. Our school boards and patrons do not want this divisiveness to impact what is best for our students. Our communities want people on boards whose most important interest is our schools and our students not agendas which may be pushed by political parties. Our communities want to have board members serving who are qualified and who have a passion to serve schools and students without regard to party affiliation. Forcing partisan politics will not enhance our communities, but is likely to fracture our local communities and the very fabric of our educational system. Unfortunately our students may become the biggest losers. Partisan elections also eliminate certain individuals in the military and federal government from participating in the election process. Not only does this take their right away, it removes another community value important to local elections – running for a local office.
- Moving the elections to the fall also deteriorates another important value held by many communities. Spring elections allow local citizens to focus on individuals who they believe will represent them well on school boards and in other local elected positions. Adding these elections to the fall with the dozens of other candidates drowns out the ability of citizens to be able to focus on local candidates. Millions of dollars in signs, adds, and campaign information every two years overwhelms the public. As a result, if local elections are moved to the fall, candidates for school board and other races will be all but forgotten in the media blitz that barrages our citizens. I have to believe our state leaders years ago purposely placed local elections in the spring to avoid the politics associated with state and national elections. I also have to believe local elections were established in the spring to assure they remained a priority instead of becoming an afterthought at the end of a long ballot.
- Seating board members during the middle of the school year is another issue which would adversely impact local boards of education. This bill seats board members in January in the middle of evaluation discussions for administrators, in the middle of contract discussions, in the middle of teacher evaluations, in the middle of planning for teacher negotiations, and in the middle of almost

everything that takes place in a school system. These new members would be seated without any knowledge about what has already been discussed, the process involved, or what has already transpired. Many boards have goals, curriculum plans, strategic plans, etc. which begin in July. Having board members come in the middle of this process makes it not only problematic, but may require much of the work to start over. Seating school board members in July matches the budget cycle, the planning cycle, the starting of new staff members, and helps to make the process seamless in our communities and avoids the disruptions of starting in the middle of the year. Having all seven board members start in July to serve the school district throughout the entire school year has been successful in the communities across Kansas for years, but now is taken away in this plan.

- Eliminating district voting plans for school districts is another part of this legislation which undercuts the values of local communities. Many consolidated schools purposely have board member districts to make sure representation is provided from each community. This is an important local value established by communities recently or years ago which will be taken away under this legislation. Even most large school districts maintain the integrity of their diverse communities by establishing and keeping voting districts. This bill takes away local control from both small and large school districts alike.
- It is my understanding that many legislators want to increase voter participation in regards to spring elections. I believe this is an important goal as well, but as my mom used to say don't throw out the baby with the bath water. Drastically changing the election cycle by moving them to the fall is so inherent with eliminating local control and community values that other options to enhance voter turnout needs to be considered first before changing the entire system. Several states have used mail ballots and have increased voter turnout significantly without disrupting the election cycle. Even the legislature requires a mail ballot for LOB elections which state leaders have indicated was to get more participation from local patrons. There are other alternatives that could be explored as well without moving the election cycle and eliminating our communities' principles of keeping elections in the spring.
- Finally, I want to state that our school board in Meade Kansas voted unanimously to oppose moving the elections because of many of the concerns expressed in this testimony. This includes members who have served only two years and members who have served for 16 years. I encourage you to listen to these elected officials all across the state who value the importance of keeping local elections in the spring and keeping them nonpartisan. Currently I am not aware of any organization representing officeholders for spring elections who support this legislation. I believe it is important for these voices in our local communities be heard. If they are not listened to, that is just another important value which will be removed from our local elected officials.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to share my concerns. If you have any questions, I would be happy to visit with any of you.

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