



Senate Ethics and Elections Committee
Senator Holmes, Chair
S.B. 171 Elections; polling places; unified school districts

Presented by Diane Gjerstad
Wichita Public Schools
Feb. 11, 2014

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the bill which would move school districts elections to November of even-numbered years and make the election partisan; require school districts to accommodate polling in a school upon request of the election commissioner, with 60 days notice; and schedule teacher training the day of the election when a school is used for polling.

The Wichita Public Schools Board of Education adopted a resolution on February 9, 2015 urging the Legislature to not change school board election dates or nonpartisan status of school board elections.

The current system of non-partisan elected leadership has served Kansas school districts well. School issues, student issues are best addressed in a non-partisan fashion to address a community's goals.

Board Members are sworn to office in July which coincides with a new school year, new teacher contracts, new programs, and changes in programs for a new school year. Board members start the new school year along with students and staff.

Moving the election to November and taking office in January would put new Board members in the midst of contract negotiations with inadequate time to become acquainted with practices and concerns facing the district. Districts begin the negotiations process and the budget process in January. This bill would put new Board members in the difficult role of evaluating budgets with little time to become acquainted with the district's priorities and business practices.

School facility use and calendar

School districts are in the education business. Districts are organized to maximize student outcomes working within the constraints of time, state and federal mandates and budgets. The bill would allow an election officer the ability to unilaterally change the school facility use and calendar, without agreement or even consultation of the locally elected Board of Education.

Sixty-day notice is not adequate notice to change school calendar and reorganize professional development training. School calendars are adopted over six months in advance, which then trigger intricate training schedules and all the logistics behind providing high quality staff development.

The school calendar is constructed to optimize learning time for students, high quality professional development for faculty, instructional requirements and assessment schedules. In-service days are placed at the end or beginning of the week because experience proves when days off are placed mid week, some students will stretch the weekend into a longer holiday and miss school. In-coming Education Commissioner Randy Watson, recently identified student attendance as one of the best predictors of student success. Unfortunately chronic absenteeism (over ten percent) continues to be a factor for some. This bill would require in-service on election days when the election officer single-handedly decides to use a school as a polling location, experience tells us absenteeism will increase.

At the high school level families are encouraged to coordinate college visits with Friday or Monday in-services. This schedule allows families extended time to visit colleges without missing class. Allowing the election official to change the school calendar and shift in-services to mid-week would have an educational impact on schools.

The primary election falls during enrollment for some districts. Some school buildings, especially elementary schools, may not have adequate space to accommodate separate locations for both enrollment and polling. The decision whether to use schools as polling locations should not be the exclusive right of the election officer.

The Sedgwick County election officer made the decision over ten years ago to move polling sites away from schools. We remain opposed to the bill's provisions allowing another governmental body to dictate use of a school facility and alter the school calendar one-sidedly, without collaboration or agreement of the elected Board of Education charged with the education of their students.

Mr. Chairman, the current system for non-partisan, school board elections in the spring serves our communities well. We would encourage the committee to not advance the bill.

**WICHITA PUBLIC SCHOOLS
UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 259
WICHITA, KANSAS**

February 9, 2015

RESOLUTION 2015-01

A RESOLUTION by the Board of Education of Wichita Public Schools, Unified School District No. 259, Sedgwick County, Kansas, regarding any bills proposed in the Kansas State Legislature to alter the process for electing public board of education members in Kansas.

RECITALS

The Founding Fathers of the State of Kansas provided in Article 6 of the State's Constitution for the establishment and maintenance of public schools;

The people of Kansas approved by popular vote an amendment in 1996 endowing locally-elected boards of education with the sole responsibility of maintaining, developing, and operating local public schools;

All children in Kansas deserve access to a public education absent of potentially divisive partisanship;

Moving local school board elections to November of even-numbered years would reduce focus on school board candidates as they compete for attention with all other candidates for every federal, state and local office;

Moving local school board elections from the spring to fall would impair a school district's efficient operation based on a fiscal year of July 1 to June 30;

Local school boards work best when decisions affecting local districts are made by local school boards; in general, local school boards oppose changing election cycles and non-partisan status of local elections; and

The current election cycle for electing local public education board members has and will continue to serve the children of Kansas well.

BE IT RESOLVED:

1. We as a Locally-Elected Board of Education call upon the Kansas State Legislature to pass no law changing the election cycle for local boards of education; and
2. We as a Locally-Elected Board of Education call upon the Kansas State Legislature to pass no law changing the nonpartisan status of local board of education elections.

ADOPTED by the Board of Education of the Wichita Public Schools on February 9, 2015.

Sheril Logan, Board of Education President,
USD 259, Wichita Public Schools

Clerk of the Board, USD 259