

Do The Right Thing For Kids

Change for Kansas City's Public Schools Begins at the Top
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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why does the Kansas City School District need new governance?

There are multiple reasons for Kansas City's failing public schools, but accountability begins at the top — in this case, with the school board. Turning around our educational system after nearly thirty years of dysfunction will require a change in the governance system. If a board were to set a tone of excellence, accountability, efficiency and competence, it would trickle down to all levels of administration and instruction.

What are the advantages of an appointed board?

National experience indicates that smaller, appointed boards, not representing sub-districts, are the most effective in bringing about major change. Urban school districts all over the country have adopted a number of different reform methods, but districts with appointed board models have experienced greater improvement in areas of (1) student achievement; (2) management and governance; (3) human capital; and (4) public confidence than districts with traditional elected boards.

How could an appointed board make a difference in student achievement?

An appointed board could protect a superintendent from political ramifications as he implements long-term strategies for the district. The new board could insist on a real accountability program where every employee from teacher to superintendent was evaluated on objective criteria based upon goals and performance. The current system is fraught with cronyism, nepotism, favoritism and inefficiencies. The new board can reallocate resources away from administrative sources and back into instruction. They can strategically organize resources more effectively than boards that are locked into past commitments. All of these factors serve to change the culture and instill an expectation of accountability.

How would the new board be appointed?

Based upon a public opinion poll of KC voters, strongest support is for members of the new board to be recommended by leaders in higher education, business and civic affairs and not elected officials. This process seeks to mitigate the influence of special interests. Under the Voting Rights Act, appointed boards can hold office for a maximum of 5 years. Then there needs to be a vote to keep the system that way or return to the elected board model. The appointed board concept allows a turn-around board and administration 5 years to re-build a failed school system. In the vast majority of other urban school districts, the appointed board approach has been so successful, that citizens have voted to keep it.

Isn't an appointed board taking away my right to vote for my representatives?

Nationally, typical voter turnout for school board elections averages 18%. In recent years in Kansas City, 8% turnout is typical. Those who do vote in these elections frequently represent special interest groups (vendors, unions, etc.) Some seats run opposed and last April, a write-in candidate won with only 379 votes. Furthermore, there are no term limits for a member of the Board. Some members have served for over 20 years. Effectively, members on our Board of Education do not represent any significant constituency. Is this democratic process worth defending?

We recognize the importance of remaining active in the democratic process. Urban schools cannot be successful in the long-term without active community participation. An appointed board model can serve to turn-around our failing district in the short term and the community can decide what governance model best serves our needs in the decades to come.

Why not advocate for all at-large positions?

We do not believe that proposing at-large elections will de-politicize the board nor bring about the major change necessary for students to achieve at the level of their peers in other cities. With historical voter turnout in KC School board elections between 8 and 10%, board members have effectively been elected by special interest groups with political agendas. At-large elections don't allow for a change in this dynamic.

Why not just find better candidates and work to get them elected?

The recent resignations of Ingrid Burnett and David Smith demonstrate the futility of trying to fix the broken school system from within. Highly politicized factions still control the sub-district election process. Furthermore, Board seats will not be open for re-election until April of 2010. Immediate change to address accountability within the system is needed long before then.

Why not just let the State take over the Kansas City Missouri School District like they did in St. Louis?

State take-over could occur if the district continues to fail. This would mean a politically appointed board by State government officials in Jefferson City. We believe it would be preferable to keep control of the school system local, but insulate it from political interference.

What about charter schools?

Charter schools are, of course, public schools. They are supported by public funds taken from the KC school district budget. Currently, one-third of the students in our district attend charter schools. There are several issues including 1) the hastily passed charter school legislation does not require the same degree of accountability that is required of district schools, 2) more than half of the charter schools are doing no better and sometimes worse than the district schools, 3) although open admission is required of charter schools, they often send the students with learning problems back to district schools.

Why can't a good superintendent fix the district's problems?

The continuing turnover of superintendents in this district demonstrates both the difficulty of hiring highly effective superintendents in a troubled district and the problems of bringing about change in the face of a highly politicized micro-managing board. We cannot hire the kind of superintendent we need to fix this district unless there is a highly qualified, professional and ethical board in place.

How can I help?

Log on to the website www.kc4kids.wordpress.com and become a subscriber by registering your email. Sign our Statement of Support so that you can be counted as someone who wants to affect real change in the governance of the district. Tell your neighbors and friends about us. Our effort as a grassroots organization is only as strong as we make it.