



To: State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee
From: Lance Melton, Montana School Boards Association
Date: January 12, 2026
Subject: HJ 48: Study of Moving the Primary Election

Dear Members of the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to today's panel discussion on HJ 48, which examines the potential impacts of moving the primary election date. This issue is critical to ensuring the stability and effectiveness of Montana's school districts.

Implications of Changing the Regular School Election Date

Too Early – The Harm of an Earlier Regular School Election Date

Moving the election date to early April would disrupt the budgeting process for school districts, as they rely on finalized student count data to accurately determine funding needs and prepare ballot language. These counts, verified by the Office of Public Instruction, are typically finalized in mid-March. Without this essential data, districts would face significant challenges in planning for the upcoming fiscal year, jeopardizing their ability to meet legal deadlines and ensure financial stability.

Too Late – The Harm of a Later Regular School Election Date

If the election date is moved to early June, school districts would be forced to make premature and potentially unnecessary non-renewal decisions for teachers due to the June 1 deadline for notifying staff. Approximately 85% of school spending is allocated to staff compensation and benefits, making staffing adjustments the primary method for addressing budgetary constraints. Without clarity on their financial situation, districts would have to preemptively issue non-renewal notices, harming staff morale, disrupting recruitment efforts, and jeopardizing the retention of high-quality educators.

Additionally, classified staff, whose contracted services typically end in late May or early June, must be provided reasonable assurance of continued employment for the following year to avoid significant liability for unemployment benefits during the summer months. Without finalized budget information, districts would be unable to confidently provide these assurances, creating uncertainty for classified staff and exposing districts to financial risks. A June election date would make it impossible for districts to meet these obligations, further destabilizing school operations.

While some may propose moving the June 1 deadline later in the fiscal year, this would only exacerbate instability. Teachers and classified staff facing uncertainty about their employment would be more likely to seek positions elsewhere, undermining the ability of districts to retain skilled personnel and maintain continuity in their workforce.

Just Right – The May Regular Election Date

The current May election date is optimal, as it balances the goal of maximizing voter turnout with the practical needs of school districts to finalize budgets and make informed staffing decisions. This timing supports both democratic participation and the stability of Montana's education system.

Aligning the primary election with the regular school election date in May could further boost voter turnout for school levy and trustee elections, while preserving the stability and efficiency of school district operations. The Montana School Boards Association fully supports this alignment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Montana School Boards Association strongly supports efforts to increase voter turnout but emphasizes that maintaining the regular school election date in May is essential for the stability of school district operations. This date ensures districts can effectively plan budgets, make informed staffing decisions, and deliver quality education to Montana's students. It also allows districts to provide classified staff with reasonable assurances of continued employment, avoiding financial liabilities for unemployment benefits during the summer months and ensuring workforce stability.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to discussing these considerations further during the panel discussion.

Sincerely,

Lance Melton Executive Director Montana School Boards Association