



March 16, 2026

To: SAVA Committee
From: Shelley Turner
Subject: Consideration of Shift to the School Election Timeline

Dear Chairwoman Manzella and members of the SAVA Committee:

For the record, my name is Shelley Turner, Executive Director of the Montana Association of School Business Officials. MASBO represents school business officials from districts across Montana who are responsible for administering school elections, managing district finances, and ensuring compliance with state law.

First, I want to acknowledge that we understand the importance of Montana having a meaningful role in the presidential primary process. Ensuring that Montana voters have the opportunity to participate early and meaningfully in national elections is an important goal. Our comments today are simply focused on the potential impacts the proposed timeline shift could have on the administration of school elections across the state.

While moving school elections two weeks earlier may appear to be a small change, even minor adjustments ripple through a very complex statutory framework.

Currently, more than 200 statutory provisions governing school elections exist across Title 20 and Title 13 of Montana law. Understanding how those statutes interact in practice can be challenging, even for experienced administrators. I have personally attempted to map how many of these provisions connect with one another, and it remains difficult to fully untangle how the various deadlines and requirements interact.

School districts must also coordinate with multiple state offices when administering elections. Districts typically receive school election calendars and procedural guidance from the Office of Public Instruction, while ballot structure and election content guidance often comes from the Secretary of State's office. Understanding how these requirements work together requires coordination between school districts, county election officials, and state agencies. Stability in election timelines makes that coordination much easier for everyone involved.

That complexity is further compounded by workforce realities across the state. Nearly half of Montana's school business officials have five years or less of experience, and many county election offices are also experiencing turnover. Institutional knowledge surrounding school election administration is already limited in some communities. Each statutory change requires districts and counties to retrain staff, rebuild election calendars, and communicate those changes clearly to voters.

Changes to election timelines also create administrative work across the system. Guidance documents must be updated, election calendars must be recreated, and administrators across districts and counties must adjust processes accordingly. These efforts require coordination among multiple agencies and local officials and represent time and resources that could otherwise be focused on serving students and voters.

Historically, school districts have absorbed these kinds of administrative changes without requesting additional resources. However, districts are operating in an increasingly constrained financial environment. In recent years, districts have experienced significant increases in required audit costs, insurance premiums, utilities, and the salaries and benefits necessary to attract and retain qualified staff in a competitive workforce market. As these pressures continue to grow, districts are approaching the limits of what can reasonably be absorbed administratively without affecting other operational priorities.

Voter understanding is another important consideration. Montanans have become accustomed to the existing school election schedule. Changes to those timelines can create confusion about when trustee elections, levy votes, and bond elections occur, particularly in communities where school elections may be the primary election voters participate in each year.

Weather conditions can also affect participation. Moving elections earlier in the spring increases the likelihood that voters in many parts of Montana may encounter inclement weather when attempting to participate. Reduced turnout is not simply a theoretical concern. Certain school bond elections require a specific level of voter participation in order to pass, so policies that unintentionally reduce turnout can have lasting impacts on communities attempting to maintain or improve school facilities.

It is also important to consider the proportional impact of this proposal. Presidential primary elections occur once every four years. School elections occur every year in every community across Montana. Adjusting the annual election system that affects all school districts in order to accommodate an election that occurs every four years deserves careful consideration.

Finally, I would offer one broader policy observation. School districts must currently return to voters through voted levies simply to access their full budget authority. Many voters understandably struggle to distinguish between new spending and districts simply receiving the funding levels already authorized under state law. If the Legislature were to address this structural issue and remove the requirement for voted levies to reach full budget authority, districts might have greater flexibility to absorb operational disruptions related to changes in trustee election timelines.

School business officials work directly with these requirements every year, and many would welcome the opportunity to share their experiences with members of the Legislature. Speaking with local school business officials in your communities can provide helpful insight into how these statutes function in practice.

MASBO members are committed to conducting elections that are transparent, accessible, and compliant with Montana law. Stability in election timelines is one of the most helpful things the Legislature can provide to local election administrators.

Thank you for your time and for the work this committee does on behalf of Montana's election system.

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