

BACK TO EDITORIAL

VOTE FOR TRUSTEES LIKE THEY MATTER

February 22, 2017 at 5:00 am |

The Idaho Legislature should indeed move school board elections to November, when far more people will be inclined to participate in the selection process. But that's not the only step that will ensure the best possible governance of our public schools. Voters will need to pay attention, and no legislature on Earth can mandate that. But one edict at a time.

Sen. Mary Souza of Coeur d'Alene has proposed moving school trustee elections from obscure dates that are low-profile, low-turnout affairs to the more elevated November general election cycle. Her reasoning is that greater voter participation will lead to greater representation for all the people within a school district's boundaries. We think she's right. Not only would moving school board elections to even-year ballots in November save taxpayer money through election consolidation, but we believe the move would heighten the attention trustee candidates receive. Critics argue that school board candidates would be dwarfed by higher profile races, but we think the opposite would hold true. Citizens are accustomed to election cycles culminating in November. That goes back to 1845, when Congress designated the first Tuesday after the first Monday as Election Day. Like scheduled meal times, voters begin to feed at the political interest trough in late summer and through early autumn, finally casting their ballots in early November. But who has their election antennae up for a May 16 vote? Only an extremely interested few, and that's the problem.

With an election date like May 16, only the most motivated voters — i.e., those who most ardently believe they personally have something to gain or lose — will bother to participate. In May 2015, a grand total of 807 souls cast ballots in the Coeur d'Alene school board election. With a November vote, school board elections will attract the attention of a broader range of citizens. If you believe in a democratic system, that's a good thing. Souza's bill also would empower individual districts to decide if they want trustees elected to serve the entire district or specific trustee zones. That's a move toward local control that is rare by Idaho legislative standards, and appreciated by this editorial board.

What remains to be seen, however, is the degree to which school board candidates will work to get elected to demanding jobs with little tangible reward, and voters to dedicate themselves to learning all they can about the candidates whose vital functions in our daily lives are overshadowed by more sensational political news. If too few people care, even Souza's legislation won't move the needle toward more effective representation.