

My District. My Vote.

by Kevin Harrison and Liz Hamor

October 6, 2022

While every adult citizen is granted the constitutional right to vote, this slogan is a powerful reminder of an American history marred by voter suppression. Deeper still, it is an unwavering proclamation that our individual votes should align directly with the needs, concerns, and issues of the communities where we reside. The Vote Local USD259 Coalition created the grassroots campaign and its subsequent slogan to amplify the voices of Wichita community members around the critical task of protecting the value of our ballot through inspiring community members to vote YES in November.

The Wichita school board is composed of elected representatives who reside in six districts within the city, along with one at-large member who can reside anywhere within the city. Currently, voters in Wichita only vote for a representative from their district for the primary, but all Wichitans get to vote for all seven board members during the general election.

In the upcoming November 8th election, residents of Wichita will get to vote on whether or not to change how Wichita residents elect their district's Board of Education members.

The Vote Local USD259 Coalition is a diverse group of community leaders who believe that equity is at the root of this nonpartisan issue. A combined majority of the district's student population is Black and/or Hispanic/Latino, but who is representing them? According to members of the coalition, students, families and voters with marginalized identities have their voices and voting power washed out in city-wide elections. A [report by the New Frontiers Project](#) in southwest Kansas agrees this happens with at-large elections.

Coalition members believe the proposed change in the method of electing board members would give power back to the people in individual districts to choose who represents them. "Voices and votes are being compromised. Power to the people instead of power to the people who have money and power," said Marquetta Atkins, a coalition member.

Voting for local representation is not a new concept. Today in Kansas, voters can't vote for candidates outside of their own district or precinct in any other elections up or down the ballot. In the 1990s, Wichita shifted from all seven USD259 Board positions being at-large to the current method of six region-specific members and one at-large member. Danielle Johnson, who activated the Coalition, commented, "You would still *get* to vote for someone at-large, otherwise everyone is at-large."

The Coalition believes another downfall of allowing the entire city to vote for all of the board of education seats means that candidates often don't have to canvas within their district. This in turn means they may not be aware of the disparities that affect students and families within their district. District-specific voting would ensure candidates spend time campaigning in their districts and getting to know their constituents and communities. It would also prevent them from spending big money or being

endorsed by large, partisan PACs to chase city-wide votes, which is inequitable for candidates from backgrounds of lower socio-economic status.

For more information about the language that will be used on the ballot, or to make a donation to help fund Vote YES USD259 flyers and yard signs, visit the website www.votelocalusd259.com.