

School districts should encourage citizen involvement in education policy making

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COLUMBIA, Mo. -President Obama's "Race to the Top" grant program, which encourages school districts to compete for \$4.35 billion, has made a strong push for education reform. While much of the education reform debate has focused on issues of adequate funding and teacher qualifications, few have addressed the role of citizen involvement in local education policy making. A University of Missouri researcher has examined the link between school board elections and local school performance. He has found a correlation between increased voter turnout for school board elections and state assessment scores.

"Education researchers know that parental involvement makes a difference, but few political scientists have asked: does voting make a difference?" said David Webber, associate professor of political science in the MU College of Arts and Science. "Because voter turnout and candidate competition in school district elections reflect a district's social capital, these characteristics of school board elections should affect how schools perform and be valued as a means for improving school performance. While the local, nonprofessional atmosphere of school board elections could potentially attract high levels of citizen involvement, few candidates and equally few voters tend to get involved in school board elections. To encourage citizen involvement, school districts should host forums to discuss important issues and send newsletters to keep citizens informed of school progress."

In the study, Webber examined official Missouri election records and 206 Missouri school districts' data records. For each district, he collected

voter turnout and school board candidate competition information. During the 1998 to 2001 school board elections, on average 22 percent of voters cast ballots. Webber found that a 1 percent increase in school board election voter turnout correlated to increased state assessment scores by more than one point. Unexpectedly, he found that candidate competition and [graduation rates](#) have a negative correlation, suggesting that school districts with lower graduation rates attract more candidates than do school districts with higher graduation rates.

"While concern for and involvement in schools may motivate some citizens to vote in school board elections, the same level of community involvement seldom motivates citizens to become candidates," Webber said. "On average, for every school board seat on which voters were asked to vote, there were fewer than two candidates vying for the position. Clearly, races for school board do not provide voters with a large number of candidates or choices. These low numbers might suggest a lack of citizen involvement in the education community that would lead to school board candidacy."

The study, "School Districts Democracy: School Board Voting and School Performance," was published this month in *Politics & Policy*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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