



If Education and Schools are so important, why does no one vote? And why does no one run?

By Deborah D. Thornton

School districts throughout Iowa held their annual School Board of Directors elections on September 11, 2007. Citizens of Iowa would swear on a stack of bibles that their children's education, and the education of their neighbors' children, is the most important service that government can provide. Yet the vast majority of these same citizens do not take the time to express an opinion through voting. And in many districts it does not matter if they do, because the elections are uncontested. No one is running for the office and no one is voting. A recent editorial opinion in the *Iowa City Press-Citizen* asked the valid question, "Can you call it an election if no one votes?"¹ Another headline, in the *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, asked if "Lack of candidates equals support?"² The costs for this inattention to civic responsibility to the taxpayers, the students, the schools, and the county governments are significant.

For the 2005-2006 school year there were 365 public or government school districts in Iowa, with a total of 483,105 students registered.³ Statewide, the regular budgets of the districts top \$4 billion. The average cost per student has more than doubled in the past 20 years, to \$6,843 in the 2004-2005 school year. Of the total state budget in 2004-2005, 44 percent was spent on K-12 education.⁴ This is a significant amount of tax money, having a significant impact on a large number of children. Yet few people are interested in serving, and few voters cast a vote during the school board elections.

With 99 counties in Iowa school districts may, and often do, cross county boundaries. Each county conducts their elections in a similar manner, with early, absentee, and Election Day voting. Polling hours vary, with some counties, such as Henry, opening their polls at noon and closing at 8:00p.m., while others, such as Johnson, open at 7:00 a.m. and run until 8:00 p.m.⁵ Poll workers at each location are traditionally required to be there for the entire time. Poll workers are paid according to locally-decided rates, with Henry County paying \$7.50 per hour.⁶

Johnson County is home of one of the largest districts in the state, the Iowa City Community School District, as well as three smaller districts: Clear Creek Amana, Lone Tree, and Solon. For the most recent school board election there were a total of 18 precinct locations, plus the early or absentee voting.⁷ Countywide there were almost 74,400 eligible voters. Early voting began even before registration closed on August 31 and ran through Monday, September 10, at 6:00p.m. Additionally in the Solon district, early voting was held the Friday before the official Election Day, in the auditorium lobby of the Solon Middle School from "5:30 p.m. through the start of the second half of the football game."⁸

Even with all of these opportunities, of the 74,400 eligible voters, a grand total of only 3,402 or 4.57 percent voted.⁹ The Johnson County Finance office reports spending a total of \$26,575 to conduct the election.¹⁰ This divides out to \$7.81 per vote cast. In the Solon School District part of Johnson County, 15.05 percent of the registered voters (4,153 total) turned out.¹¹ Solon voters have turned out in double digit percentages for the last five years, one year reaching 48 percent.¹² However, this is the exception.

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In Henry County there were 13,907 potential voters, with 5 polling places and absentee voting opportunities. In this county, 1,177 people voted, or 8.4 percent. The cost was \$4,220.00 or \$3.60 per vote.¹³ In Linn County, the Cedar Rapids area, the Auditor's report shows 5,378 votes being cast of 143,729 possible, for 3.74 percent turnout. The Deputy Commissioner of Elections for Linn County estimated that they spent just under \$45,000 for those votes, or approximately \$8.35 per vote.¹⁴

In 2000 an Iowa Association of School Boards report listed statewide turnout at "around 10 percent." They estimate that for 2007 it has fallen to about 6 percent.¹⁵ However, their official position is that these elections should still be held separately, as they are officially "non-partisan" and merging with November general elections could add a "partisan flavor." An option the Iowa State Association of County Auditors supports is holding the school board elections every other year to reduce the costs.¹⁶

For the ICCSD election there were three candidates for two seats in 2007, one incumbent and two challengers. The three candidates all raised campaign funds from supporters and covered additional expenses from their personal funds. The total amount spent, according to Iowa Ethics and Campaign Disclosure Board reports, totaled over \$5,200.¹⁷ For each vote cast in the ICCSD election — a total of 2,586 — the candidates spent over \$2.00.

The Dubuque Community School Board had two open seats, and only two candidates, one an incumbent and the other a first time candidate. Both candidates expressed the opinion that the lack of competition was an indication that "the public is pretty well satisfied with how the district is being run."¹⁸ In Fort Dodge, Iowa, there were three candidates for two seats, one incumbent and two challengers.¹⁹ More than two candidates ran for a seat in few districts.

There are two issues involved with school board elections: one is the lack of people to run for the positions, and the other the low voter turnout. A logical inference is that if more people run, then more interest will be generated and more people will vote. On October 4 the Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce held a forum to begin addressing the lack of school board candidates entitled, "Making the Grade: Should You Pursue School Board Leadership."²⁰ It is an effort, although a little late for 2007, to begin addressing both problems.

¹ Editorial Board "Our View – Can you call it an election if no one votes?" *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, September 14, 2007, p. 12.

² Mary Nevans-Pederson "Lack of candidates equals support?" *Telegraph Herald*, September 9, 2007, p. 13A.

³ 2006 Condition of Education Report, Iowa Department of Education, p. 25.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 221.

⁵ "September 11, 2007 School Election," <<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/0709sch.htm>> October 1, 2007.

⁶ Conversation with Andrea Cook, Henry County Auditor's office, October 4, 2007.

⁷ "September 11, 2007 School Election, Guide to Election Night Returns," <<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/0709guide.htm>> October 1, 2007.

⁸ "September 11, 2007 School Election."

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Conversation with Richard Claiborne, Budget Coordinator, Johnson County Government, October 4, 2007.

¹¹ <<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns>> October 4, 2007.

¹² Rob Daniel "Officials: No explanation for low voter turnout," *The Iowa City Press-Citizen*, September 13, 2007.

¹³ Conversation with Andrea Cook, Henry County Auditor's office, October 4, 2007.

¹⁴ Conversation with Sue Wold, Deputy Elections Commissioner, Linn County, October 4, 2007.

¹⁵ Lisa Bartusek, IASB associate executive director, "School Board Elections: Voter Turnout Needs Your Help."

¹⁶ Rob Daniel "Officials: No explanation for low voter turnout," *The Iowa City Press-Citizen*, September 13, 2007.

¹⁷ "IECDB State/Local Campaign Disclosure Reports" <http://iecdb.iowa.gov/reports/browse.php?mode=county&next=JOHNSON/School_Board> September 21, 2007.

¹⁸ Mary Nevans-Pederson "Lack of candidates equals support?" *Telegraph Herald*, September 9, 2007, p. 13A.

¹⁹ "Three seek two seats on Fort Dodge school board," *The Messenger*, September 10, 2007, p. A1.

²⁰ Jeffrey Rudolph "Community involvement is vital for future of schools," *The Iowa City Press-Citizen*, October 4, 2007.

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