

LWVIL GOVERNMENT POSITION: SCHOOLS

Support for a public school system that is equitable both in quality for the student and financing for the taxpayer.

Position in Brief: The League of Women Voters of Illinois supports a system of high quality elementary and secondary schools for all children in Illinois which provides for local control of school program and budget within minimum program requirements set by the State. The State should provide leadership to local communities for program development and should set standards for recognition and accreditation of schools. The effectiveness of educational programs should be evaluated regularly. The League favors minimum standards for graduation and promotion of students. The League supports increased professionalism for teachers including stringent teacher preparation standards, comprehensive teacher and principal evaluations, changes in tenure and increased teacher compensation. The State should assume the major responsibility for funding public schools and guarantee an adequate level of financial support. League believes that charters should be established by local school boards and that the Illinois State Board of Education should continue to monitor the progress of existing charters before supporting further expansion.

SCHOOL QUALITY (1986 and 1987)

Governance The League believes that the State of Illinois should determine minimum program for Illinois elementary and secondary schools. The Illinois State Board of Education should assume the primary leadership role in initiating policy, establishing minimum standards, and coordinating delivery of services. The local school board should implement minimum standards and provide leadership in the community for program development. In addition, the local school board should make recommendations to the Illinois State Board of Education concerning programs for Illinois schools.

Primary Purpose of Schooling The League believes the primary purpose of schooling is the transmission of knowledge and culture through which children learn in areas necessary to their continuing development. Such areas should include the language arts, mathematics, biological and physical science, social sciences, the fine arts, physical development and health. Emphasis should be placed on the development of critical thinking skills and the integration of knowledge. Each school district shall give priority in the allocation of resources to fulfilling the primary purpose of schooling.

State Program Mandates The League supports the following instructional mandates: language arts, mathematics, science, social studies/history, foreign language, art and music, vocational education, special education, gifted education, early childhood education and health education. There should be flexibility in implementing mandates at the local level.

Mandates such as metric measurement, career education, safety education and consumer education should be integrated into other programs rather than existing as separate mandates. Driver education and physical education, especially at the high school level, should continue but with more local options permitted. The League supports bilingual programs to enable non-English-speaking children to learn English as quickly as possible, but programs must be flexible.

Local school districts should be required to provide the following services: media programs, school food services, pupil personnel services, student health programs, necessary transportation services and special services to disadvantaged children.

The League supports state requirements for compulsory attendance and minimum standards for length of school day and school year. The League opposes any additional state-mandated school holidays.

State Standards for Schools and Students The State should set standards for the recognition and accreditation of schools and school districts. The goals and learning objectives established by the State should be minimum standards, which local districts should enhance. Local districts should be permitted and encouraged to be flexible in the evaluation of students' learning of essential information and skills.

The State should set minimum achievement standards for graduation and promotion to various grade levels. Remediation programs should be provided at all levels of instruction for students achieving below grade level.

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education The League believes that the effectiveness of education should be evaluated by both class time requirements and knowledge gained as measured by mastery of learning objectives. Evaluation should include information assembled for the school/school district Report Cards, student test scores, programs offered, student/staff ratios, building standards, and qualifications of teachers. No one factor (e.g., test scores) should be used exclusively. The League does not support the withdrawal of funds from a school district that does not meet state standards, but does approve withdrawal of recognition as a last resort, after extensive and creative remediation efforts have been tried.

Personnel Issues The League supports stringent entrance requirements into a four-year undergraduate program for students who intend to teach. Such students should pursue an undergraduate course of study that primarily emphasizes the liberal arts and sciences and allows for early and varied teaching experiences. Certification should be granted after the student obtains a liberal arts and sciences degree, completes a successful period of internship and passes an objective test to ensure competency in basic skills and subject matter to be taught.

The League supports a comprehensive evaluation process for both teachers and principals. Teachers should be evaluated by administrators (principals, department chair or other administrators) and other teachers, all of whom should receive training in teacher evaluations. A comprehensive evaluation should be based on the following criteria: attendance, classroom management skills, instructional methods, knowledge of subject matter, continuing professional education and interpersonal skills. Evaluations of principals should be done by administrators and teachers who are trained to evaluate. The evaluation should be based on the following criteria: ability to maintain productive

parent-school relationships, organizational skills, ability to establish and preserve a positive school climate, instructional leadership, ability to objectively evaluate personnel and their teaching skills, continuing professional education and interpersonal skills.

The League favors modifications in the tenure laws including extension of the two-year probationary period, establishment of a plan for periodic renewal of tenure and elimination of seniority as the sole criterion for dismissal of teachers when reducing the teaching force (RIF, reduction in force).

To ensure that the teaching profession attracts and retains highly qualified teachers, the League supports the following: an increase in beginning teachers' salaries financed either by the State directly or through grants to local districts to use at their discretion for increased salaries, an increase in the role of teachers in instructional leadership and management decisions, the establishment of a career ladder for teachers which includes increased salaries for increased teacher responsibilities and an increase in salary for teachers who take advanced courses or obtain advanced degrees.

SCHOOL FINANCE (1975, 1977, 1979, revised 1993): The League believes that schools should be provided stable, reliable and adequate revenue through a combination of federal, state and local sources. State funding levels should be sufficient to enable districts to provide for all students an education that meets both standards established by the State Board of Education and legislated mandates. The League opposes additional mandates without state funding provisions. The State should not subsidize districts too small to meet state standards but rather should encourage consolidation through financial incentives. State standards for education should also address the importance of adequately maintaining and building school facilities.

General state aid to schools should be reviewed regularly, taking into account increases in the cost of living, professional estimates of the cost of quality educational programs, and regional differences in the costs of providing the same or similar services. The League strongly supports using a weighting factor for low-income students, believing that basic funding for disadvantaged students should reflect their need for additional services. Local districts should be held accountable by the State for the expenditure of money for programs that fill special student needs.

The distribution of state funds to public elementary and secondary schools should reduce financial disparities between districts and increase equity for students and for taxpayers. The State should concentrate its efforts on raising the level of the financial resources of poorer districts. Capping of allowable expenditure per pupil should not be used as a means to achieve equity. A reasonable minimum local tax effort, achievable without referendum, should be required for a district to receive equalization aid.

The League strongly supports reduced reliance on local property taxes to fund schools and believes that the State should assume the major responsibility for funding public education. The League opposes proposals that would provide public funds for private schools. The income tax (preferably at a graduated rate) provides the most productive and equitable source of revenue for schools. The League opposes state assumption of the total cost of public education because it could diminish local control and educational innovation.

CHARTER SCHOOLS (2001): The League of Women Voters of Illinois believes that the Illinois State Board of Education should continue to monitor the progress of existing charters before supporting expansion, specifically looking for improvement in individual student test scores and achievement of the specific goals stated in the school's charter. League also believes that charters should be established by local school boards, with adequate provisions for public education and participation in the decision making process. An appeal process to the State Board of Education should remain in place as an option for charters who have been denied by their local school boards. While we feel that advantages of charters largely outweigh the disadvantages, we have identified the following areas of concern:

- 1) School funding. Charters do nothing to address the issue of equitable and adequate funding of education, including special education.
- 2) Financial impact on underlying school districts, especially smaller districts. Charters place financial pressure on smaller districts by drawing money out of the traditional public schools.
- 3) Privatization and profit-making. The LWVIL opposes the presence of private, for-profit companies in the governance of public education, as there could be a conflict between the interests of shareholders in the corporation and the citizens of the state.

LWVIL has also identified areas of opportunity resulting from charter schools:

- 1) Innovation. Charters have a mandate to share innovations in teaching methods, curricula and standards of assessment for all stakeholders.
- 2) Increased parental choice and involvement within the public school system.

Background and Action League support for equal educational opportunity is a national position that is now embodied in League principles. Because education is a responsibility of the states, however, LWVIL and many other state Leagues have adopted positions on the equitable distribution of state resources for public schools.

In 1973, a comprehensive new study that examined more equitable ways to raise money and distribute it for schools was authorized. The position adopted in 1975 supported the concept of the resource equalizer formula.

During the 1983-85 biennium, League efforts were directed towards re-educating members about school finance so that they could serve as community resource people, marshaling citizen input into the school reform movement of 1985. During this effort, the League realized that it was necessary to broaden the position to include other aspects of education in addition to funding. A study of the role of the state in determining educational policy was adopted by the 1985 LWVIL Convention. Action during this biennium emphasized full funding of mandated programs and development of a school funding system that was equitable and adequate for all schools in Illinois.

The League concentrated its efforts during 1985-89 on ensuring that education was given the financial resources to implement the 1985 education reforms. In 1985, the League worked for passage of an increased cigarette tax when it became obvious that there was no hope of passing an increase in the income tax. In 1987-89, the League concentrated its efforts on convincing the General Assembly that an income tax increase

was necessary if the education reforms (particularly for high-risk pre-schoolers) and formula revisions were to be funded.

In 1990, the League joined the Coalition for Educational Rights in support of a lawsuit against the State challenging the constitutionality of Illinois' school funding system. LWVIL would work for school funding largely through its participation in the Coalition, which it chaired from December 1994 to June 1996, until the Coalition's dissolution in late 1997.

In the 1991-93 biennium, through an action campaign adopted at the 1991 LWVIL Convention, local Leagues began to promote public understanding of school finance issues and the need for school funding reform. During the same period, LWVIL monitored and provided testimony to the Legislative Task Force on School Finance. The League also actively supported an amendment to the educational article of the Illinois Constitution, passed by the legislature in May 1992, which was intended to strengthen the constitutional requirement for an adequate and equitable state school funding system. The amendment fell just short of passage in November 1992. In spring of 1993, the League supported unsuccessful legislation that embodied the recommendations of the Legislative Task Force.

Recognizing that long-term solutions for school funding and other human service needs require reform of the State's tax system, the League embarked in 1993 on a tax reform action focus centered around a campaign for a graduated income tax (see State Fiscal Policies position, pg. 42). The 1995 LWVIL Convention approved the formation of a Working Committee on State Tax and School Funding Reform to direct the League's efforts in these areas.

The League provided testimony in early 1996 to the Governor's Commission on Education Funding. LWVIL, with its education coalition partners, supported legislation stemming from the Commission's recommendations. These recommendations, including an increase in the personal income tax, failed in both the 1996 and 1997 spring sessions.

After unsuccessful lobbying for an increase in the income tax as a preferable source of revenue, the League did not take a position on a bill passed in December of 1997, which provided an additional \$485 million for education through a tax increase on cigarettes, telephone calls and riverboat gambling. The League did prepare a statement opposing gambling as a solution to Illinois' fiscal problems (see Appendix, page 81).

During the 1999 session, several tuition tax credit bills were introduced. The Educational Expenses Tax Reform Act, providing for an annual state income tax credit for "qualified educational expenses" exceeding \$250 up to a maximum credit of \$500, passed the General Assembly and was signed by the Governor. League believes that this threshold is unlikely to be met by the vast majority of parents of public school children; therefore, LWVIL considered this legislation as a benefit to parents of private school children and opposed it.

During the 2000 Session, the General Assembly attempted to pass the Illinois budget with a provision to provide for payments of public funds to nonpublic schools. The initiative was not included in the final budget after an intense lobby effort by the Illinois Federation of Teachers, the Illinois Education Association and League members.

Delegates at the 1999 LWVIL Convention adopted a study of charter schools. Beginning in August of 1999, a study committee of 20 produced two packets of background data/information and a consensus packet. Their investigation focused on the advantages and disadvantages of charters, current and potential funding sources, the impact of charters on local school districts and the educational implementation of charters. The committee did significant outreach to educational stakeholders. Representatives of the Illinois PTA, the Illinois Education Association, the Illinois Federation of Teachers, the Illinois Association of School Boards and the Chicago Public Schools attended meetings, both as participants and resources. Local league study chairs disseminated study information to their members through their bulletins and informational meetings; many organized community forums on the issue. The LWVIL Board approved the Charter School position in April 2001.

Since 1999, LWVIL representatives have attended meetings of the Education Funding Advisory Board (EFAB) which was appointed by the General Assembly to study school funding problems and make recommendations on funding levels to the General Assembly. The EFAB report described the board's study of low funding, high achieving public schools and established minimum levels for general state aid payments to schools. LWVIL filed comments in support of the EFAB recommendations.

From 2001-2009, LWVIL and its members have taken action on the issue by meeting with legislators about school funding, calling and writing legislators during the legislative session, writing letters to the editors, and participating in media events. Local Leagues have held meetings to educate the public about school funding issues and problems. Ralph Martire from the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability spoke at many of these meetings. Some local Leagues studied and took action on local school referenda. One local League worked closely with their school district, the city, and the business community to monitor and evaluate the addition of charter schools to the district. LWVIL participates as an active member in several coalitions which share a common interest in reforming Illinois' school finance system. Coalitions include Better Funding for Better Schools and the Responsible Budget Coalition. Memberships in coalitions provide the League with opportunities to learn more about school funding issues and pending legislation, and allow the League to bring its positions to the discussions. The League also brings its membership and the grassroots support its members provide to the cause.

A state-wide committee of League members interested in education was formed in Nov. 2008 and consists of representatives from several Leagues around Illinois. The committee is working to devise strategies to educate LWVIL members on the issue of school funding reform as well as other topics with the goal of expanding our grassroots effort.

At the 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009 LWVIL Conventions, Leagues voted to adopt an action focus on State Fiscal Policy and School Funding for the following two years. Fiscal policy and school funding are issues which are closely connected because education funding is a large portion of the state budget. Other League positions are also impacted because the State has insufficient revenues to provide for many of the needs that the League has identified.

At the 2009 LWVIL Convention, Leagues voted to pass a Will of Convention directing that a letter be sent to the Governor and the General Assembly urging them to pass a

fair and equitable income tax, restoring Illinois to fiscal health in an accountable and transparent manner.

During the Spring 2009 Legislative session, SB 612 (PA 96-105) was passed doubling the number of charter schools in Illinois with the bulk of the increase going to Chicago. There were changes made in how charters operate in Illinois which included requiring 75% of the teaching staff be certified by the state and that charters submit yearly audits, among other changes. The League took no position on this legislation.

(See also State Fiscal Policies)