

EDUCATION

POSITION IN BRIEF

Support equal access to quality public education, to be achieved by participation of government and citizens at all levels and by adequate financing based on an equitable and flexible tax system.

BACKGROUND

The original position was adopted in 1975, recognizing the interrelationship of LWVPA positions on education, equality of opportunity, and taxation. Since that time, language on school funding has reflected current positions on taxation and fiscal policy. The position was updated after a 1985-1986 review of teacher and other professional evaluations, preparation, certification, and tenure.

In 2003, the position was further updated, emphasizing the need for both adequate state funding and a system that distributes these funds in a manner that diminishes the dependence of school districts on the resources of local taxpayers, thereby decreasing the unacceptable disparities in resources between rich and poor districts.

As part of the 2003 update, the position was expanded to address implementation of the 1997 Charter School Law and the problems inherent in the system of state funding of local special education costs.

In 2014, the League added to its Charter School position by incorporating LWVUS's privatization position to provide more detail in what we believe about the establishment, governance, and funding of Charter Schools.

In 2015, the League added positions about high-stakes testing based on a study done by 9 local Leagues and adopted by concurrence at the 2015 state convention.

POSITION IN DETAIL

The League supports:

- The establishment of basic goals of education, minimum standards, and criteria for curriculum and teacher evaluation by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.
- A realistic minimum level of expenditures for all districts, set by the state. Uniform expenditures across the state should not be required, and local districts should maintain control of spending by determining local priorities with citizen input.
- A combination of state and local funds to finance the public elementary and secondary schools of the Commonwealth, with the Commonwealth's share being the greater.
- Allocation of state funds based on a specific dollar amount per pupil. Additional funding should be provided based on an evaluation of special conditions in a district, including density, adequacy of the tax base, and the number of students eligible for specific programs.

- Allocation of state funds for special education based on the actual number of students with mental or physical disabilities, the nature of the disability, and the costs of appropriate instructional programs and support services.

The League opposes tuition vouchers and tuition tax credits for students in nonpublic schools.

Setting Goals

The local school board should be responsible for setting local educational goals, in addition to the minimum goals set by the PA State Board of Education and administered by the PA Department of Education. Administrators, teachers, students, and citizens should have a meaningful role in helping the local school board set local goals.

The administration of the local school district should:

- Be responsible for implementing the curriculum standards set by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.
- Be responsible for adding additional courses to the basic curriculum, with the final decision up to the local board.
- Encourage student, teacher, and citizen participation in the curriculum-making process.

Innovative Programs

The Pennsylvania Department of Education should exercise leadership in generating interest and providing funds to encourage experimenting with alternative schools, innovative programs, and community use of school facilities. Innovative programs should be continually evaluated for their effectiveness.

Charter Schools

Because of the impact of charter schools on the districts from which they draw their students, LWVPA believes that Pennsylvania law should provide:

- Accountability measures for program and achievement that hold charter schools, including cyber-charter schools, to the same standards applied to district schools.
- Clearly defined Charter Appeals Board criteria and a written rationale for upholding or overturning a school district decision.
- Greater financial support from the state for districts that are funding charter schools, including full state funding of cyber-charter schools.

Based on the LWVUS privatization position:

- School districts should not be privatized in their entirety.
- Authorization of charter schools should be made after an informed, transparent planning process and thorough analysis of the implications of privatizing service delivery.
 - There should be on-going and timely communication with parents, teachers, students and the public.
 - There should be clear statement of the circumstances as they exist and what is to be gained by opening a charter school.
 - There should be definition of the quality, level and cost of charter school(s) expected.

- Consideration of authorization of charter schools should include cost-benefit analyses evaluating short and long term costs of privatization, including the ongoing costs of contract administration and oversight.
- Authorization of charter schools should consider an understanding of the impact on students and parents, the broader community, environment and public employees.
- There should be an open process with clearly defined criteria to be used in authorizing a charter school.
- There should be a provision and process to ensure the assets will be returned to the school district if the charter school fails to perform.
- Selection of charter school applications should reflect a data-driven selection of entities whose goals, purposes, and means are not incompatible with the public well-being.
- The charter contract should reflect careful negotiation and drafting.
- There should be adequate oversight and periodic performance monitoring of the charter school by the School Board to ensure that it is complying with all relevant laws and regulations, contract terms and conditions, and ethical standards, including public disclosure and comment.
- Legislation governing the privatization of public education and creation of charter schools should include the following requirements:
 - An open process that allows for citizen input and oversight in a timely manner
 - A reasonable feasibility study and evaluation
 - The establishment of carefully crafted criteria for selection of the charter school
 - The retention of liability and responsibility with the school board and the PA Department of Education;
 - Allowance for and promotion of opportunities for innovation and collaboration, and
 - Provision for employment, benefits and training plans on behalf of employees displaced as a result of authorizing a charter school.

Assessment and High-Stakes Testing

Within our schools, assessment of student learning should include measures **other than** standardized tests. Such assessments provide a useful tool for

- monitoring academic progress
- helping teachers modify instruction
- Identifying students who need additional support, and
- Informing placement decisions.

Standardized tests should be developed in a transparent manner with a clearly designated purpose and should be normed on populations similar to the ones to be tested. They should be aligned with state-adopted academic standards. Such assessments and their consequences should be modified based on needs of students with disabilities and those who are English-language learners. Standardized tests may be useful in

- comparing student performance across schools, districts, and states
- measuring overall academic progress and achievement within and across groups
- monitoring student academic growth, and
- promoting consistent content in subject areas.

However, standardized assessments should **not** be used for high-stakes determinations such as grade promotion or graduation requirements. They should **not** be used as a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of teachers or administration.

Funding should **not** be related only to standardized test performance. All schools should have adequate funding to enable their students to be successful.

The League believes that high-stakes testing negatively impacts student well-being, curricular programs, district budgets, and instructional time. These negative effects may include aspects such as student and teacher stress, a narrowing of curriculum to spend more time on tested subjects, lack of availability of student electives because of focus on tested subjects, demands on district budgets for testing and remediation, and loss of instructional time to test preparation and administration.

Information obtained through testing should be made available to students, parents and schools of attendance. Without student and/or parent permission, individual student data should **not** be available to colleges, employers and the general public.

The League believes that legislation and policy regarding education assessments need to be carefully formulated to reduce potential litigation in areas such as special education, parental rights, and privacy concerns.

Supervision and Evaluation of Educational Professionals

The goal of supervision and evaluation systems should be to increase the effectiveness of education personnel, including district superintendents and assistant superintendents and all individuals identified as “professional employees” by the Pennsylvania Public School Code.

A local school district should be responsible for establishing a system to supervise and evaluate all professionals that it employs. The system should be consistent with law and regulation.