



# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF WISCONSIN EDUCATION FUND

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## EDUCATION

### ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Since 1927 the League has been active in studying and promoting improvement of the elementary and secondary system of public education in the state. League positions on education were reaffirmed and expanded in 1971, 1989, 2002 and 2005.

The League's position on reorganization of all school districts into kindergarten through 12th grade systems has virtually been achieved. By 1975, the legislature had mandated that all territory in the state must be part of a high school district. In 1997, there were 426 school districts, of which 367 were K-12 systems and 48 were elementary systems feeding into 10 union high school districts. Because of sparse populations, the long distances involved and the desire for local control, it is unlikely that the 48 elementary systems and the 10 union high schools will be organized in full K-12 systems.

The local control position resulted from a study of educational financing in 1972-73. League members indicated that although they support the right of each child to a quality education, this does not mean that all school districts must provide the same kinds of course offerings. Although members agree to the need for state standards, they believe that each school district should have considerable control over local programs and personnel.

Since 1947, the League has supported a school aids formula which would equalize the financial resources of school districts. In the 1972-73 study, League members rejected the idea that the state should take over complete financing of elementary and secondary education. In large measure this was because they feared the concomitant loss of local control, although they believed that the state should bear a significant

cost of school financing, recognizing that the property wealth of a local district or lack of it should not be a limiting factor in a child's education. League has continued to support an equalization formula which ensures that equal tax effort would yield equal revenue.

In 1976 the League joined the state as amicus curiae (friend of the court) in the case which was heard in the state supreme court, claiming the "negative aids" formula, which required that those property-rich districts who could afford to tax themselves at a low rate and spend at a high level would be required to contribute part of their revenues to the general aid fund to assist other districts where property values were low. The court disagreed with the League position and declared the formula unconstitutional.

The 1973 legislature imposed direct cost controls on school district budgets to ensure property tax relief to taxpayers and to hold down shared costs. Through a referendum, a local district could approve higher spending.

Minimum educational standards were established, mandating employment of licensed or certified staff, minimum legal salary payment and fringe benefits for teachers, provision of in-service training, remedial reading programs in K-3, operation of a kindergarten program, and special education programs. The employee's share of teachers' retirement fund and social security was transferred from the state to the local school district. The principal and interest on long-term indebtedness and annual capital outlay up to \$100 per pupil were included in the state's cost sharing formula.

The 1985-87 state budget contained a wide variety of proposals affecting education, including increased support for categorical programs; establishing academic excellence through curriculum planning, testing and course offering requirements; improving staff

performance through new requirements and incentive; providing special help for children at risk; and increasing equalization in the distribution equalization aids.

In 1993, a number of major changes occurred. The state undertook to pay 2/3 of school costs and instituted revenue caps, limiting how much a school district could increase its total revenues each year. A local referendum is required to raise local property taxes. To keep spending within the revenue limits, the state established the Qualified Economic Offer (QEO) in determining employee compensation. If negotiations between employees break down, a QEO may be offered, making binding arbitration no longer available. A QEO is a proposal for salary and fringe benefits which is no more than a 3.8% increase.

Statewide testing of students in several grades was instituted.

In 1997, member agreement allowed League to strongly oppose the proposal to provide school vouchers for families to use to pay for private and religious schools, because it diverts tax money from the public school system to private use.

An education committee formed in 2002 suggested changes in our education position. Since 1993 the state has assumed responsibility for 2/3 of the cost of public education and has imposed revenue limits. This has created even greater disparities in per pupil spending. The updated position approved in 2003 focuses attention on program equity between urban and rural districts. In addition, the language defining districts into K-12 systems was eliminated, since public education now provides services to children as young as 3 years old.

The Leagues' position on reorganization of school districts into K-12 systems, which was achieved in the early 1970's, was also updated to include cost effective educational equity. For example, in 2002, over 75% of the districts had less than 2,000 students. The committee wondered whether consolidation of some of the smaller districts could decrease administrative costs.

The committee recommended two more changes in 2003 that the State LWV Board overturned. First, the committee recommended changing the language for special needs students to reflect a recent Supreme Court ruling, which adjusts funding for disabled students to include economically disadvantaged and students with limited English language skills. The board felt, however, that the more specific definition could be clarified in the Leagues explanation column. Second, the committee felt that the last sentence of our position could be eliminated, now that public school choice has been achieved by state statute. However, the board pointed out that vouchers remain a concern. The committee felt that language in the last sentence of our position could be used to advocate against vouchers.

Finally, several educational issues were recommended for further study in 2003. For the first time in history, federal funding for public education will be tied to test scores. This new federal legislation, called the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (also called the "No Child Left Behind Act"), calls for closing schools that have not achieved certain levels on standardized tests, which takes control of public education away from the local school boards. The committee felt that the League might want to add language to our positions that outlines the need for accountability that is controlled locally. In addition, technology now allows for the creation of virtual schools, which can have an impact on funding, since students no longer have to live in a particular district to enroll in this type of alternative education.

The 2003-2005 education study resulted in two new positions that expanded and strengthened the already held positions of local control and opposition to tax dollars given to private or religious schools. One position opposes the creation of more charter schools outside of local school board jurisdiction where there is no system of local input or control. School districts are encouraged to cooperate with other organizations, institutions and agencies while maintaining chartering authority. The other position addresses the expansion of Choice schools in Milwaukee in which public funding goes to private and religious schools with no

requirements for student performance or employee standards. There are some legislative requirements for financial accountability, but not comparable to requirements of public schools. The new position also seeks to ensure that any individual or private company contracting to provide public education, as is the case for some virtual charter schools, is also publicly accountable.

Although a large part of the 2003-2005 study dealt with the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on local public schools, no specific position was recommended regarding this federal legislation. A survey by local leagues on the impact of NCLB in their school districts showed that most districts felt that there were some positive qualities of the Federal legislation, but also felt that the legislation restricted local control, was not adequately funded, and needed more flexibility regarding student assessments. Since the NCLB is federal legislation, no state League position was proposed. LWVWI could act on most state legislative requirements because of the LWVWI's position on local control by School Boards.

The 2003-05 Education Study also studied Home Schooling as an alternative to traditional public education. Although there were concerns about requirements regarding home schooling, there was no consensus about teacher qualifications, record keeping, or assessment of student learning.

### **Children with Special Needs**

The League defines "special needs" to mean children who are in need of additional help either because they are physically or mentally handicapped, because they come from culturally or economically deprived backgrounds, or because they are gifted. Because these children require a greater expenditure per child than other children, the League believes the state should provide more funding for them. In 1973 League supported a law mandating education for all children ages 3 to 21 with Exceptional Educational Needs (EEN) due to a handicapping condition. For the first time, the compulsory school law applies to the mentally, physically and emotionally handicapped.

The League was actively involved in the early 1980's in a coalition to provide special/specific programs and aids for gifted and talented students.

(For other action affecting K-12 education, see *Social Policy*.)

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### **VOCATIONAL, TECHNICAL AND ADULT EDUCATION**

League's VTAE position was the result of a study done in 1981-83. In 1984 League was able to use the newly adopted position to support a proposal that the responsibility for the initiation of programs should be shared between the local and state board since education and program needs vary throughout the state. We also criticized the lack of an affirmative action statement in the mission statement for the VTAE system.

In 1985 The League successfully opposed proposals in the state budget that would allow local boards to be elected by election districts and that would restructure the state board.

In 1989-90, the League led a coalition of groups in getting a law enacted which prohibited discrimination against a number of protected groups, including women, in both the University of Wisconsin and the VTAE system and requiring them to set up procedures for resolving complaints. Also in 1990 The League supported an administrative rule which would create a greater opportunity for women and minorities to serve on VTAE boards.

(For other action affecting VTAE, see *Social Policy*.)

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### **UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN FINANCING**

The positions on the financing of the UW system came as a result of the education financing study conducted in the 1987-89 biennium. League members gave the highest priority to providing UW education access to Wisconsin high school students in the upper 50% of their graduating class. Priority was also given to transfer students within the UW system, nontraditional students and minority students in general. Members also felt that it was somewhat

important to provide access to out-of-state and out-of-country students. Enrollment limits should be part of the UW system fiscal management program.

League members agreed that funding goals should also be consistent keeping education affordable to all Wisconsin citizens and to making financial aid available. Funding increases should cover the cost of a full-time equivalency student at the rate equivalent to the cost of living increases based on the mid-range established by peer institutions.

In addition to increased reliance on General Purpose Revenue (GPR) funds, members felt long-term operation funding goals should rely on private sector donations/foundations, tuition, research grants, and fees/surcharges.

Funding policies should reflect a strong desire for students to graduate within four years of attendance. This would not preclude students from taking longer to graduate if desired, but indicates a preference for adequate funding to provide timely access to needed courses. Moderate importance should be attached to state funding for the purpose of advancing state policy goals, advancing private sector development, and funding programs which support minority, disadvantaged, and special-needs students.

League members also agreed that the state should use GPR funding to fund instruction by placing the highest priority on instruction by tenure-track faculty, less priority on instruction by academic staff and least priority on instruction by graduate students, although all three should exist.

UW faculty and academic staff salaries should be maintained at a level which attracts/retains superior teachers and should not be sexually discriminatory. Other factors to be considered should be cost-of-living increases and peer institution median salaries.

No action has been taken directly using this position. (For other action affecting the University system, see *Social Policy*.)