



UPDATE on Issues

League of Women Voters of the Houston Area

February 2009

EDUCATION

When discussing education issues with our local, state, and national elected officials; school boards; and public agencies involved with education issues, it is important to keep in mind the positions that the League of Women Voters have already adopted both at the state and local levels.

LWV-Houston Area Positions

At the local level in 2000, the Houston Area LWV developed a position paper on bilingual education in our area that encompassed these position statements:

- The purpose of bilingual education should be to teach every limited-English proficient (LEP) student to read, write, and speak English as soon as possible while maintaining academic achievement.
- The basis on which the effectiveness of bilingual education should be determined is twofold: (1) how quickly transition into English is made and (2) how standardized testing results on academic achievement are used to validate data that can be confirmed.
- These factors can be mitigated by (1) consistency of curriculum among school districts, (2) adequate resources available from the Texas Education Agency, (3) raised educational expectations among families, and (4) new avenues for recruiting additional teachers who are qualified and committed.
- Because the preservation of ethnic cultures is the responsibility of the home and other institutions, funding for bilingual education should be focused on the acquisition of English proficiency.

LWV Texas Positions

At the state level there are two positions under the "Government" section dealing with education: Public School Finance and Public School Testing and Accountability.

Public School Finance deals with achievement by the public school finance system in providing an equitable distribution of funds and equity to the taxpayer and includes the following:

- A sufficient level of state support to Texas public school finance system that provides an equitable distribution of funds and equity to the taxpayer
- A sufficient level of state support to Texas public schools to ensure that all children receive an education suited to their needs
- Equity achievement by a weighted approach to distributing funds, equalization aid that incorporates a guaranteed tax base yield, and state assistance for essential construction or rebuilding
- Opposition to the voucher system approach, as well as choice options that do not promote racial integration and/or equal access to quality education

In 2007 the League of Women Voters-Texas published a Facts and Issues publication entitled *Mandated Achievement Testing in the Public Schools of Texas*. The Facts and Issues was written by many League members throughout the state serving on the Education Committee under the leadership of Nan Clayton and Anne Roussos. Interviews were conducted with members of a number of professional organizations, as well as the Texas Education Agency, for information for this publication. Based on input from local leagues, the study groups focused on the question of the administration of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)

test and its effect on the schools. Specifically, members discussed the question, "How much governmentally mandated academic testing is needed for accountability?" Additional questions were asked as follows:

- How does testing measure higher level thinking skills?
- Has testing been effective in narrowing the education gap?
- What is the impact of testing on teachers' time?
- What is the cost of testing?

The following position on Public School Testing and Accountability was adopted as a result of this study.

Public School Testing and Accountability deals with how to achieve state-mandated standardized achievement tests that measure individual mastery and proficiency, are used as a diagnostic tool to measure growth and progress over time, and are developed by Texas educators who are experts in their fields.

Additionally, this position includes the following requirements:

- A curriculum that provides academic rigor and is developed with input from educators, the public, business groups, and elected and appointed officials who represent the state's diverse population
- An accountability system that identifies academic achievement and gaps in performance in subgroups, but is not used to establish school or district ratings or to close schools
- Equitable opportunity for academic achievement for all students
- Support for teachers in the mandated testing environment

Education Focus for 2009-2011

Bills filed for the 81st Legislative Session thus far focus upon financial aid to college students, cutting the cost of textbooks, making schools more accountable, and helping veterans attend college.

A number of bills are currently being proposed that deal with higher education changes. College tuition and college quality will be a focus of this legislative session. At issue is increased funding so that more Texas universities can achieve Tier 1 status, which means that increases in research must be mandated. Currently, the California university system boasts nine Tier 1 universities and New York has seven. By comparison, Texas has only three Tier 1 universities: University of Texas-Austin, Texas A & M University, and Rice University. Additionally, at one time 60% of the costs of Texas public universities were paid for by the state; today that support has dropped to 38%, resulting in higher tuition costs for students.

The following bills have been proposed to date:

- Senate Bill 105 proposes to freeze tuition rates at Texas institutions for two years and tie increases to the inflation rate.
- Senate Bill 104 proposes to prevent tuition at an institution from exceeding 2008-2009 levels.
- Senate Bill 214 proposes to limit fee increases to no more than 5% per year.

However, the overarching questions deal with the increasing numbers of students in Texas who want to attend Tier 1 institutions, the number of minority students still unable to afford university tuitions, the need for more research funding, and recognition of major projects at Texas universities. Essentially, the priority must be to "close the gaps" that are prevalent in the university and college systems in Texas, such as tuition disparity and research funding.

The upcoming biennium academic issues suggest the following priorities:

- Maintenance of flexible tuition
- Top 10% admissions
- Graduation rates
- Financial aid
- Progress on closing the gaps of disparity between tuition and research support
- Research and technology transfer

Changes in public school financing are not scheduled for discussion during this legislative session; however, several “stop gap” measures may well be proposed or revisited. Inflation, changing property tax structures, and shifting student populations may necessitate a series of discussions on public school financing. It is also expected that the 2006 school finance bill may be revisited. In terms of actual school funding, there may be an increase of funds for transportation and technology. Texas legislators may also investigate ways to attract and retain the most qualified teachers with ideas such as increasing funding for teacher grants and awards programs, improving teacher training, and revisiting incentive/merit pay programs for teachers.

Recent History of Public School Finance in Texas

In 1993, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 7, which has been nicknamed the “Robin Hood” plan because it asked for districts with a higher tax base to redistribute some of their wealth to districts with fewer financial resources. It was to be carried out each district with a higher tax base using one or more of the following options:

1. Merging its tax base with a poorer district
2. Sending money to the state to help pay for students in poorer districts
3. Contracting to educate students in other districts
4. Consolidating voluntarily with one or more other districts
5. Transferring some of its commercial taxable property to another district’s tax rolls

The bill was signed into law that year and two years later was upheld in the Texas Supreme Court. In 2004, however, Judge John Dietz of West Orange-Cove ISD ruled in *CISD vs. Neeley* that the state’s funding system was inadequate, inefficient, and unconstitutional. There were three groups of plaintiffs involved. One asserted that the \$1.50 tax cap was an illegal statewide property tax. Another asserted that the 38% of funding coming from the state into the overall school finance system was inadequate. The third claimed that the state school finance plan left a wide gap between rich and poor districts and violated the Texas Constitution.

The Texas Supreme Court ruled in November 2005 that local property taxes used to finance public schools resulted in an unconstitutional statewide property tax because many school districts were at or near the \$1.50 per \$100 valuation limit. However, the court did not find overall state funding for education to be inadequate or inefficient and thus reversed the lower court’s findings on those issues.

Following that decision, the state legislature met in 2006 under special session and made several adjustments to equalize the state’s financing of education, one of which was a requirement that 65% of a district’s funding for instructional programs would be state supported. The law was structured as a three-year phase-in that required the state to fund instruction at 55% for 2006-2007, 60% for 2007-2008, and finally 65% for 2008-2009. Of course, the main concern of local districts is that they are often mandated to support “unfunded” programs, which are costly.

Currently, districts have strong priority lists for the 81st Legislative Session that include topics such as additional school funding for instruction, an enrichment tax rate, end of course tests, the 4 × 4 curriculum, and online course funding. The 4 × 4 curriculum is the new state requirement of four years of math and four years of

science for all graduating students in high school. Most importantly, school districts are demanding that whenever the state legislature mandates changes for education these mandates must be fully funded by the state.

Recommended reading:

Christie, K. (2009). Anticipating 2009's "Top 10." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(5), 317-319.

Christie discusses the top ten educational issues for state legislatures this year across the country.

They are as follows:

- 1) Ensure job opportunities and workforce with the right skills
- 2) Reduce the number of dropouts
- 3) Ensure course quality and learning
- 4) Seek world-class status
- 5) Align information-rich systems from pre-K through college
- 6) Increase capacity for assisting schools that need it most
- 7) Raise the bar for leadership and teaching
- 8) Extend time for learning
- 9) Ensure quality from pre-K through third grade with rich learning incentives
- 10) Make dollars go farther

Glickman, C. (2009). Educators tell business how to stop ruining America. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(5), 392.