

Guide for LWFVNC Action and Advocacy on Public Schools, 2015-2016

MISSION AND GOALS

The League of Women Voters (LWV) believes strongly that high quality public education for all children is necessary to sustain our democratic way of life and the economic health of our state and the people. Furthermore, having studied education issues at the national, state and local levels for many decades, the LWV concludes that adequate funding is essential to the ability of the state to provide and sustain such an education.

To that end, the LWFVNC:

- opposes vouchers, tax credits and scholarships that shifts public tax dollars to private entities;
- supports public, pre-K education programs as essential to successful education outcomes and the long term prosperity and quality of life of North Carolinians, and these programs should be fully funded;
- supports highly qualified teachers as a necessary part of a quality education and supports training, teacher support, professional development and salaries competitive with the national average;
- believes charter schools that receive public dollars must be held to the same educational, accountability and transparency standards as traditional public schools.

In accordance with these priorities, the LWFVNC advocacy plan should include:

- formation of an observer corps to attend NCGA committee meetings and hearings related to these issues;
 - appointment of a designated representative of LWFVNC to be available to speak to these issues;
 - monitoring of state funding and budget issues;
 - collaboration with other organizations to advance the LWFVNC's priorities;
 - outreach of local Leagues to their district school officials to obtain information on the (omit "local") impact of school funding in their local school system.
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The LWFVNC works with other local Leagues in support of the above MISSION AND GOALS.

Locally, the LWFVNC supports redistricting policy that maintains racial balance, continuity of individual educational experience and high quality of integration within the schools and individual classrooms.

What are charter schools?

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Charter schools are taxpayer-funded, semi-autonomous public schools that operate within a school district. State laws vary, but generally charter schools may be operated by a group of parents, teachers, and/or community members who have negotiated a contract with a sponsoring body. In most states, the sponsoring body is the local district, either alone or in combination with a state agency, but in NC charters are granted solely by the State Board of Education (BOE), with no local input.

LWVODC Concerns:

- The original idea that charter schools would be labs working in cooperation with traditional schools has changed so that in many cases charters are now playing a competitive role, and funding is insufficient to finance all competitors. The departure of students choosing charters doesn't allow the traditional schools to cut back on expenses for programs or buildings for the remainder of the district. Some costs are flexible, but many are fixed, and budgeting for the future becomes a challenge. There is also no provision for cases in which a student begins the year in a charter with the attached funds, but then returns to the traditional school because of exclusion or dissatisfaction, but without the funds. Traditional schools are required by law to accept the students that charters may expel or disappoint.
- Opening new schools without input from or collaboration with the local district opens the door to inefficiency, overlapping services and poor use of limited funds.
- Studies indicate that equal access is also endangered by the proliferation of charter schools that are heavily segregated toward a particular race or socioeconomic class, thus challenging the principle of equity in public education.
- Charter schools are not required, as are traditional public schools, to provide transportation or subsidized meals. Therefore their enrollment may be limited to students who do not need free or reduced-price lunches and whose families can provide transportation.
- Accountability, both academic and financial, is a special problem in NC because of the minimal resources allotted to the State Board of Education for oversight of charter schools. The State BOE is supposed to evaluate the educational effectiveness of charters and the effect of them on the local public schools and to report to the Joint Legislative and Educational Oversight Committee.
- Fiscal accountability becomes an even greater concern as many charter operators are either contracting with for-profit businesses to run their schools or are themselves entrepreneurs and/or developers who are primarily concerned with the bottom-line. The money-making possibilities are clear in districts that have high per pupil allotments. All states with charter schools have witnessed multiple financial scandals related to their operation, and NC is no exception (*Charlotte Observer* 2/08/2014). Again with NC's minimal resources for oversight, fiscal accountability is difficult to monitor.

Background

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The original intent of charter schools was that by lifting some of the restraints affecting public schools (teacher licensing standards, instructional hours requirement, class size maximums, compliance with state salary schedules, participation in state retirement system, purchasing on state contracts, and provision of transportation or meals for students), charter school staff would be free to pursue innovative teaching methods that might improve student performance. In fact some early supporters of charter schools saw them as laboratories where new ideas could be tried on a small scale with minimal risk, and, if effective, the charter and traditional schools could work together to implement them district-wide. Additionally the purpose of some charter schools has been to serve specific populations, e.g. “at-risk” students, possible dropouts, children with limited English language, or those with special talents, with the goal of working cooperatively within the larger system.

History of charter schools in North Carolina

In 1996 NC’s General Assembly passed the state’s first charter school legislation. It stipulated that funding would be based on the average per pupil allocation in the local education agency from which the student came, i.e. the money follows the student and capped the number of charter schools statewide at 100.

Money comes from the same mix of federal, state and local sources provided to the traditional schools: federal funds, which are targeted primarily toward a specific population such a low income or handicapped children; state funds, which may be used for any purpose except purchasing or constructing a building; and local funds, which may be used for anything.

In 2011 in response to “Race to the Top,” a federal program that excluded states that limited the number of charter schools, SB8 removed the cap, and the number of NC charters expanded from 34 in 1997 to a projected 152 by August 2014. However, the legislature also cut the staff of the state BOE, the sole monitoring and regulating agency for charter schools.

In 2013 the legislature passed S337. This law removed the earlier provision that gave the board of the local school unit the opportunity to be heard by the State BOE concerning any adverse impact the new school might have on the district. Thus, in NC the local school unit, while providing the per pupil funds, is completely out of the loop regarding approval, impact or accountability of the charter schools within its district. Another change made by the charter-friendly revision lowered the percentage of charter teachers required to hold licenses from 75% to 50%. It created a Charter Schools Advisory Board that is located administratively within the NC Department of Public Instruction, which, in turn, reports to the State BOE.

In recent years the trend from the General Assembly has been for greater leniency toward charters, including extended time periods for their compliance with current regulations.

Advocacy positions on which the LWV may act on public policy issues pertaining to public schools

Guide for LWNCA Action and Advocacy on Public Schools, 2015-2016

National: LWWUS: The League of Women Voters believes that the federal government shares with other levels of government the responsibility to provide an equitable, quality public education for all children pre-K through grade 12. A quality public education is essential for a strong, viable, and sustainable democratic society and is a civil right.

<http://www.lww.org/CONTENT/FEDERAL-ROLE-PUBLIC-EDUCATION-POSITION-0>

National: LWWUS position—REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT: Privatization (Excerpt)

<http://www.lww.org/content/privatization-position>

“The LWWUS believes that when governmental entities consider the transfer of governmental services, assets and/or functions to the private sector, the community impact and goals of such transfers must be identified and considered. Further, the LWWUS believes that transparency, accountability and preservation of the common good must be ensured.

“The League believes that some government provided services could be delivered more efficiently by private entities; however, privatization is not appropriate in all circumstances. Privatization is not appropriate when the provision of services by the government is necessary to preserve the common good, to protect national or local security or to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of society.... These services include education... and programs that protect and provide basic human needs.

“Best practices for government regulation of the privatization process should include the following requirements:

1 (of 7) An open process that allows for citizen input and oversight in a timely manner”

Ruth Ann Groh

Nicola Jordan

3/27/2014

1/7/2016