

# EDUCATION

***Support for substantial and sustained funding for all levels of education in Oklahoma. Support for educational innovations that demonstrate improved student outcomes without jeopardizing funding for all schools. Support for frequent, public, and transparent reporting of finances by all schools and institutions receiving public funds.***

**Basic tenets:** The League of Women Voters of Oklahoma (LWVOK) concurs with the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) in affirming that the primary responsibility for education rests with the states. We also agree that an equitable, quality public education is critical for students and that the federal government should be primarily responsible for funding programs mandated by the federal government. A basic role of the federal government in funding education is to achieve equity among states and populations on the basis of identified needs. The federal government is responsible for providing a series of general standards which the states and local districts can build upon. The federal government is also responsible for creating national assessments for individuals and schools to evaluate their performance on the general standards cited above, and for giving money to states and local districts through both competitive and noncompetitive grants to address local or state problems in meeting standards.

The LWVOK continues to support the following statements made in the previous position on education. The state must:

- Meet its constitutional obligation to finance common schools,
- Equalize financial resources among school districts,
- Continue to support improvement in the ways the various districts assess property values and collect the taxes on those properties,
- Raise the constitutional limitation on the millage for education,
- Continue to use the broadest base of taxes possible in order to provide adequate funding,
- Remove loopholes in tax laws including those that provide exemptions from property taxes,
- Consider formulas other than Average Daily Attendance (ADA) as a basis for state aid.

The LWVOK also believes that schools should follow the curriculum prescribed by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The goal should be for all students to succeed on the end-of-term evaluations related to this curriculum.

The LWVOK supports universal pre-K and mandatory kindergarten. It also supports special education for students identified as having specific needs including special programs for gifted children.

The LWVOK believes that state government should assume the major responsibility for financing state institutions of higher learning. The LWVOK also believes that improved

financing, accountability of expenditures, and more efficient financial procedures are keys to providing quality higher education in Oklahoma.

The LWVOK believes that the existing post-secondary governing boards should be analyzed in order to determine if they provide the best governance for the system. The coordinating board, the State Board of Regents for Higher Education, should remain a constitutional board.

The LWVOK believes that career technical institutions deserve greater emphasis in the total educational landscape. More counseling of students with regard to career tech should be made available and more relationships with businesses that use career tech skills should be developed.

**Educational finance:** The legislature must meet its responsibility to ensure that a long-term plan (minimum five years) exists to provide adequate funding through diversified means for the operation of every public school system into the future. The LWVOK supports a restoration of the gross production tax to at least 7% on all mineral production with a greater percentage of this revenue devoted to education.

The LWVOK supports having a pool of funds to assist districts with low ad valorem tax revenues. These funds should come primarily from non-residential funding sources. It should be noted that the Oklahoma constitution already contains language that addresses the need for equalization of ad valorem building funds.

Educational finance should be studied to determine the real cost of educating students in each district. This study could include the state aid formula as well as disparities in local ad valorem taxes.

**Vouchers:** The League of Women Voters of Oklahoma (LWVOK) opposes the use of vouchers, the expansion of existing voucher programs in Oklahoma and any changes to the tax code designed to accomplish the same purpose as vouchers. Existing vouchers should only be used for a school that meets a student need not met by a public school. Further, they should only be used when they can be shown to improve the education of the individual student. Schools accepting vouchers should be held to the same standards of academic and financial accountability as public schools.

The LWVOK supports requiring transparent financial reports from the schools that accept vouchers. It also supports requiring that only highly-qualified teachers who are certified in their teaching assignment be hired just as in public schools. The teachers and staff at these schools should be allowed to have collective bargaining.

**Charter Schools:** Charter school sponsors, entities and contracted vendors should be financially accountable to the public. Any use of tax monies should be financially accountable and subject to public audit. More rigorous scientific research by the Oklahoma State Department of Education comparing Oklahoma student outcomes at

charter schools is needed. The Oklahoma State Department of Education should not sponsor charter schools.

Charter schools must be required to regularly submit transparent financial reports to the public that include the schools themselves and their entities. Their application process must be equitable and transparent. They must also hire only highly qualified teachers (certified in their teaching assignment) and give these teachers and other school staff access to collective bargaining.

**Virtual Schools and Courses:** Students should be screened by the local school district before admission to a virtual program and regularly monitored to ensure that their educational plans are appropriate for progress toward a successful outcome. A virtual program must have a defined admission process that reflects the fact that their education and child development plans are appropriate for successful outcomes. This admission process must be meaningfully audited by the state. Virtual school students should have guidelines regarding the use of any public spaces, like libraries. Virtual schools should have the tangible and intangible resources to establish standards for maintaining appropriate equipment, instructor training and time spent with a teacher.

Virtual courses can allow students access to subject matter that their schools cannot or will not offer. Such courses should be used sparingly to compensate for deficiencies in the curricular offerings of local school districts. More rigorous scientific research is needed to determine whether specific models of blended courses (e.g. flipped courses) provide demonstrated improved student outcomes over traditional courses.

**Post-Secondary Education:** The Oklahoma Legislature must fund post-secondary education in order to develop students with the skills and knowledge for the future. Colleges and high schools should coordinate curriculum to prepare students to be successful in post-secondary education without remediation. Local school districts should encourage students to take AP and dual-enrollment courses while still in high school so that they enter college with some college credits. Career technology institutions should continue entering into agreements with private businesses in order to prepare students for specific jobs.

## **BACKGROUND**

Concern for the quality of education provided Oklahoma's children has been a thread running through League of Women Voters of Oklahoma (LWVOK) program positions for decades. In the 1970s, mandatory kindergartens and special education were the focus of study and consensus. The special education programs, which expanded services for handicapped and gifted students, became a reality early in the 1980s.

During that decade, Oklahoma's 39<sup>th</sup> Legislature revised the funding formula to more accurately reflect the cost of educating different groups of students. The LWVOK addressed the use of both Average Daily Attendance (ADA) and Average Daily Membership (ADM) as a basis for determining state aid. This was a part of the new

equalization formula that was established by the 39th Legislature to more equitably distribute funds to local school districts.

Study of career and technical education led the LWVOK to support expansion of such programs. Since the adoption of this position, the LWVOK has seen the legislature set up the mechanism for the formation, governance, and funding of area career and technical schools. Oklahoma now has one of the premier career and technical programs in the United States.

Other LWVOK studies have addressed textbook selection, the need for counseling programs in elementary grades, abolishing the office of County Superintendent of Schools, consolidation of some school districts, and smaller class size. The LWVOK also supported concepts set forth in legislation passed in the second session of the 39th Legislature, calling for more stringent qualifications for educators entering the profession and giving support for continuing in-service training.

Inequities in school funding, as they related to disparities in opportunity for quality education for Oklahoma school children, provided the driving force that directed the LWVOK to seek a change in the system of financing education. A LWVOK study examined the current method of financing common (public) schools, based on a combination of local ad valorem taxes and state support, and concluded that changes needed to be made for the benefit of all the children in the state.

To achieve the reform, the LWVOK considered a lawsuit challenging the ad valorem tax system as practiced in Oklahoma that causes variation in assessment percentages among and within counties. The LWVOK participated as amicus curiae in a successful suit requiring the State Board of Equalization to fulfill its constitutional duty to equalize ad valorem taxes across the state.

The LWVOK also pursued action at the legislative level by giving support to efforts to create equalization in school funding. The citizen awareness campaign funded by the League of Women Voters Education Fund helped build support for the new system.

The LWVOK was involved in extensive lobbying for the passage of HB 1017, the Education Reform and Funding Act of 1990. With the passage of HB 1017, several long-standing LWVOK education positions were implemented including laws that dealt with the administration, structure, and the funding of the common school system.

This law mandated that all schools meet standards equal to or greater than those of the North Central Accrediting Association. Some of these standards include improved curriculum, better access to counselors, and class-size reduction. There were serious penalties for failure to adhere to the standards contained in the law. This law also abolished the office of County Superintendent of Schools and mandated half-day kindergarten.

The law that resulted from HB 1017 improved funding to Oklahoma's public school system by adding earmarked sales and income tax hikes to fund mandates of the law. This increase in funding gave an additional \$230 million to the public school system in

the first year after implementation. With the passage of HB 1017, Oklahoma took a giant step toward improving its system of public education. However, as soon as it was passed, an anti-tax movement started a petition to overturn the bill. By a vote in October 1991, HB 1017 was affirmed.

Delegates to the 1989 LWVOK Convention voted to adopt a position statement opposing the use of corporal punishment in the public schools. This new position was based on the belief that the basic constitutional rights of all people, regardless of age, must be protected. In the 1991 legislative session, a bill was introduced in the House to prohibit corporal punishment in public schools. The bill was not passed out of the House Education Committee.

In the summer of 1992, the LWVOK participated in a coalition that urged the State School Board to implement a two-year moratorium on corporal punishment in Oklahoma public schools. The Board voted unanimously to institute a moratorium. Because of the many concerns the Board received about local control, the Board stated that the moratorium was only a suggestion. During the following legislative session, several bills affirming the use of corporal punishment were introduced in the House and killed in the Senate.

In 1992, the House and Senate joined in an interim study to recommend legislation on textbook reform to the 1993 legislature. The panel of educators and legislators returned with suggestions for legislation that were essentially recommendations made by the LWVOK following the 1986 textbook study. The bill was passed and the reforms were implemented.

The three decades that transpired since the passage of HB 1017 saw numerous changes in Oklahoma education. The PASS objectives that were established in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century were replaced by Common Core standards which were replaced almost immediately by the Oklahoma Academic Standards. End of instruction tests were replaced, to some degree, by the national ACT or the SAT tests. A third-grade reading requirement (under the Reading Sufficiency Act) was instituted and, perhaps most importantly, the state began to assign grades (A-F) for school performance.

The added stress of so many accountability measures coupled with the fact that teacher salaries and general funding for common education declined led to a severe teacher shortage. By the fall of 2018, almost 2,900 emergency certifications were issued. This was after the Oklahoma Legislature had authorized a \$5000 pay increase for teachers. Clearly, the bright future predicted by the passage of HB 1017 has not been realized.

Almost since it was passed, the provisions of HB 1017 were in danger. Mandates such as class size were routinely ignored because school districts lacked the financial resources to support classes of 20 or less. Finally, in 2016, SB 933 completely removed all penalties for districts that did not adhere to the recommended class size limits.

One area that continued to flourish in Oklahoma despite the loss of revenue was early

childhood education. Three out of four 4-year-olds attend pre-K in Oklahoma compared to one in three nationwide. Not only does pre-K serve more students than in other states, but Oklahoma's pre-K programs have been praised for their quality.

The passage of HB 1017 in 1990 and a public reaffirmation of the goals of the bill in 1991 (when voters defeated SQ 639 which would have repealed HB 1017) should have meant that education would be experiencing some much-needed improvements. However, in 1992, voters approved State Question 640. As a result, the legislature is limited to passing revenue bills only if three-quarters of the legislators in both houses approve and the governor signs the bill. The only alternative is for voters to pass revenue bills by a majority vote in a general election.

Without the ability to raise revenue, it became almost impossible for the legislature to raise the funds necessary to properly fund schools. While state appropriations for common schools declined by as much as \$1 billion between 2007 and 2017, the school population in the state continued to rise. The inability or unwillingness of the legislature was only one of the reasons that education funding decreased during this time period.

Believing that reducing the income tax rate would spur growth and development, Oklahoma lowered its top income tax rate from 6.65% to 5% over the period from 2004 to 2016. At the same time, the oil and gas industry (a major source of state income) was in a slump. Also, the legislature reduced the gross production tax (GPT) from 7% to 2% on some oil wells.

At the beginning of legislative sessions from 2015 forward, each legislature faced a budget deficit. These deficits were in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The highest was \$1.3 billion. State agencies, including education, knew that they would be working with fewer and fewer dollars. The only question was: How deep would the cuts be?

Under these conditions, it was not surprising that Oklahoma teachers chose to strike in 2018. State lawmakers had spent too many years using the law that resulted from SQ 640 to excuse their failure to raise enough revenue to support education. Year after year, educators had listened to promises of increased funding for education only to be disappointed. The League of Women Voters of Oklahoma issued a press release supporting the teachers' demands.

The strike lasted nine days and drew national attention. Even though teachers won a significant pay increase (\$5,000 for teachers with only one year of experience; as much as \$7,000 for teachers with over 25 years of experience), the education community made it clear that this would not be the end of their demands. They noted that money was still needed for things like textbooks and to raise the salaries of school employees who were not in the classroom.

The teachers' strike had ramifications beyond the schools. When the 2018 elections were concluded, a number of legislators who had opposed support for the teachers were defeated and the number of new legislators who had been teachers increased substantially. The new governor has promised to make Oklahoma's teachers the best-paid in the region. There is a feeling of optimism about the future of education.

However, teachers are concerned that lawmakers still do not understand all that is needed to improve the state's schools.

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