

TUITION TAX CREDITS, VOUCHERS, AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

At its **2005** convention delegates voted to study charter schools as part of the larger update of its study on Financing Public Education K-12. At the time, there was no transitional funding to support school districts with growing numbers of charter schools, and standards for evaluating student performance relative to non-charter schools were inadequate. While the League already had a position favoring the targeting of taxpayer funds to public schools, delegates representing areas with high concentrations of charter schools believed that an updated review was warranted. This activity culminated in new position language.

CHARTER SCHOOL STATEMENT OF POSITION AS ANNOUNCED BY THE STATE BOARD, NOVEMBER 2006

The League recognizes that charter schools represent an educational experiment whose efficacy has never received appropriate validation. Moreover, a review of the performance of charters in New York State indicates that, while some do an excellent job of educating children, others are less successful than the most substandard traditional public schools. Therefore, The League supports public funding of academic research into the characteristics of charters that lead to student academic success.

Authority to grant, oversee, renew, and revoke charters, other than those granted in public school conversions, should be vested in a single entity. Charters should be subject to more stringent oversight of charter compliance in the renewal/revocation of process, with greater emphasis on positive educational outcomes.

The League supports measures to limit the negative financial impact of charter schools on their home districts, including: transition assistance; home district payment to charters based on the same standard used to pay operating aid to school districts (While the League supports enrollment as the appropriate measure, it believes the measure should be identical for both charters and traditional public schools.); separate levels of reimbursement for elementary and secondary education to charter schools based on what the home districts spend for the level of schooling provided; limitation of the percentage of a school district's budget that could be paid to charter schools. The League is opposed to State provision of capital construction and renovation services and reimbursement of capital expenditures for charter schools.

The League supports limitation of the number of charters issued in New York State. As a general matter, it believes that the number of charter schools should not be increased without prior successful implementation of the improvements outlined in this position. In lieu of amendment of the Charter School Act to increase the total number of charters that could be granted, it supports retention of the current total (100) with amendment of the Charter School Act so that a charter could be reissued if a charter school ceased to function for any reason.

Any increase in the cap on charter schools should be tied to amendment of the Charter School Act so that charters are required to prove positive educational outcomes for all children (disaggregated by special needs) exceeding those in traditional public schools as a precondition for charter renewal. To more accurately measure student outcomes in charters and to compare them to those in traditional public schools, the League supports public funding to measure educational growth in individual students as they progress from grade to grade in charter schools (a value added approach).

Past League Activity

In 1985, bills were introduced in both the New York State Senate and Assembly to provide tuition tax credits for parents of non-public school students. The League took strong action in opposing this move on the grounds that this would erode the amount of money available for the traditional support of the public schools.

In 1991, a proposal came before the Board of Regents, which would have allowed parents to remove their children from particularly poor public schools and send them to other institutions through the use of vouchers. Once again, the League opposed the plan and the Regents withdrew it.

In the next legislative session, the issue of vouchers was again raised, and the League along with other public education supporters opposed their passage. In 1993, the aid formula was simplified and transportation aid keyed to take into account a district's wealth. The Regents' term of office was reduced from seven to five years.

In October 1996, an Action Alert was issued urging members to contact the State Board of Regents and Commission of Education Richard P. Mills to voice the League's opposition of a voucher experiment that would permit the use of public tax dollars to give students vouchers to attend private or religious schools. The Board of Regents met on November 7, and the proposal by Regent Emeritus Carballada was defeated by a vote of 12-3.

In 2006 the Governor proposed, as part of his 2006-2007 budget, an income tax credit for certain individuals to offset the cost of private school tuition or tutoring. The League opposed this measure, and it was deleted from the final budget.

Early in the 1998 legislative session, Governor Pataki sent to the Legislature a program bill creating a Charter School Program for New York State. During the session, the League lobbied vigorously against the proposed legislation on the theory that, without a dedicated funding stream for charters independent of the funding for traditional public schools, the legislation would dilute the money available to traditional public schools while continuing to require them to function as educators of last resort. The PTA, AAUW, and the School Boards Association joined us in our opposition to this legislation.

The LWVNYS was successful in holding the bill in the Assembly during the regular session, however, during the special session held in late December the legislation became part of a trade with the Legislature for their 38% pay raise. The League was able to work in the Assembly Democratic conference to take out of the bill some of the most onerous language but in the middle of the night without legislators seeing the final printed language and with no debate in the Assembly, the Charter School Action 1998 was passed. It also passed in the Senate where retiring Senator Charles Cook, chair of the Education committee spoke eloquently in opposition to the legislation. Governor Pataki signed the legislation and it became law immediately.

Delegates to the 1999 League convention directed the League board to conduct a monitoring project of the Charter Schools in New York State. The Albany County League will be monitoring The New Covenant School, one of three charter schools to open in 1999. Several more charter schools are slated to open in September 2000.

The League of Women Voters of Albany County, in conjunction with the State League, has developed a Charter-School monitoring instrument. Leagues who are interested in assessing Charter Schools in their local area can contact the State League for the research-monitoring instrument.