

League of Women Voters of Ohio
Testimony on HB 119 (Dolan) Executive Budget Request
April 10, 2007
Joan Platz

Chairman Schlichter, Ranking Member Strahorn and members of the House Finance and Appropriations Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, my name is Joan Platz, and I am a member of the League of Women Voters of Ohio (League). The League appreciates this opportunity to share its views on funding for education programs included in HB 119 (Dolan). The League of Women Voters recognizes that the General Assembly will again need to make very difficult decisions regarding this budget, and extends to you its appreciation for your dedication to public service, and for considering the welfare of all Ohioans, especially the children, in your deliberations.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio believes that public education is the cornerstone of our democratic government, because without the participation of educated and informed citizens our system of government can not effectively function. That is why financing a high quality public education program based on standards and accountable to the public is so important. We understand that the tight state budget requires setting priorities, but we hope that the House will work to ensure that all students have access to a high quality public education system that provides them with the knowledge and skills to enter the work force, continue their education, and participate in community and civic activities.

The League believes that it is the state's responsibility to ensure that sufficient funds are available to support a constitutional thorough and efficient education system. Ohio's school funding system should be comprehensive: meet standards for equity, promote stability, and be explainable to the public; provide a realistic level of state support per student based on the cost of meeting the educational needs of students and the cost of state mandates; address phantom revenue and reduce reliance on property taxes to fund schools; and provide sufficient revenue to support education. The Executive Budget request includes many changes in policy and law that address these components. The following are some of the priority items in the Executive Budget request that the League supports:

- Increasing the per pupil basic aid amount, continuing the supplements, and continuing and expanding Poverty Based Assistance, and flexibility for Poverty Based Assistance.
- Providing \$6.5 million for the Post Secondary Enrollment Options program in FY09.
- Eliminating the second ADM count. The League would also support the recommendations of the SBE regarding ADM.
- Increasing the equity of Ohio's school funding system through changes in the distribution of Parity Aid.

- Expanding the homestead exemption to help reduce the reliance on property taxes to fund schools. The League would, however, prefer that the homestead exemption retain some income limitations.
- Expanding early learning opportunities for three and four year old children, increasing support for public preschool, and continuing support for all day Kindergarten.
- Increasing accountability to the public by imposing a moratorium on new charter schools; requiring charter schools to comply with the same state laws and rules as traditional public schools; eliminating the Educational Choice Scholarship Program, and giving the Ohio Department of Education more authority regarding community schools, and data collection and verification.
- Implementing a pilot project to develop and implement tools that promote efficient practices within school districts.
- Continuing state assistance to school districts for capital improvements and building construction to ensure health and safety of school facilities.

The League sees this Executive Budget request and previous budgets approved by the General Assembly as progressing toward a school funding system that is thorough and efficient, although we are not there yet. The League also identifies as priorities and recommends the following changes in HB119:

Basic Aid

- Adopt the State Board of Education's (SBE) recommendation to count students where they are educated, including a "phase-in" of counting all-day Kindergarten students in basic aid.

Poverty Based Assistance

The Executive Budget request uses the number of participants in the Ohio Works First program to determine the poverty indicator for Poverty Based Assistance funding. Several organizations have recommended using a more accurate measurement of poverty: the unduplicated count of children ages five to seventeen whose families participate in Ohio Works First, food assistance, disability assistance, and medical assistance.

Meeting the Needs of Students

- Fully fund the Special Education weights. (Executive Budget funds them at 90 percent.)
- Support the SBE's recommendations for Gifted Education to increase gifted units by 190 in FY08 and 230 in FY09, and increase the value of the gifted unit based on the teacher minimum salary schedule. Currently there are 1,110 gifted units statewide, which have been unchanged for several years.

Early Childhood Education

- Support the recommendations of the SBE to fund preschool services for young children with disabilities at \$100 million in FY08 and \$138 million in FY09. This would increase the funded units by 979 units. Currently 2,024 units are funded,

but 3,043 units are in operation.

-Count Kindergarten students who attend full day Kindergarten programs as full time students in a district's ADM.

Public Funds for Public Schools

The League opposes using public funds to support private education through the Cleveland Scholarship Program, the Educational Choice Program, and the Autism Scholarship Program; subsidizing private education with funds for auxiliary services and nonpublic administrative costs; and supporting community schools that are not sponsored by elected boards of education.

These are examples of programs that are supported with tax dollars, but are not accountable to the public through elected boards of education, and are not required to meet the same standards as "traditional" public schools. These programs undermine public education and its civic purpose, by diverting limited public funds to private entities with different missions and goals than our traditional public schools, and diverting public support and responsibility away from our public schools.

The League urges continued work on restructuring Ohio's tax system to make it fair, efficient, stable, and provide sufficient resources to fund education and other state programs. If additional resources are needed to support state services through a restructured system, the League supports increasing the personal income tax, followed by broadening the base of the sales tax. We also urge that school districts be held harmless if restructuring the tax system affects the tax bases of districts.

The League thanks the members of the Ohio House for their efforts over the past years to improve funding and accountability for public schools through aligned standards, parity aid, support for teachers, support for technology, and school facilities assistance. Public education is an important civic endeavor, because its mission is to prepare future leaders and citizens. But the success of public education depends on the continued strong support from elected officials and the public.

We look forward to working with the members of the House, the Governor, and members of the Senate to improve education for all children in Ohio, and build a prosperous future for all Ohio citizens. Thank you for this opportunity to present our views regarding HB 119.