



TESTIMONY ON SB 141
Senate Education Committee
The Honorable Joy Padgett, Chair
Tuesday, January 29, 2008
Joan Platz, Education Lobbyist, League of Women Voters of Ohio

Madame Chair, members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Joan Platz and I am a volunteer with the League of Women Voters of Ohio (League). The League appreciates this opportunity to testify in support of the increased accountability requirements for community schools and their sponsors outlined in Sub. SB 141.

The League supports a quality public education system, which we believe is essential to maintaining an effective and responsive democratic government. A quality public education system ensures that all children, regardless of their educational needs or backgrounds, have opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills needed to participate actively as citizens in a democracy, continue their education, and earn a living.

The League does not have specific positions that support or oppose community schools, but we believe that public funds should be used only for public schools, where decisions regarding education policies and finances are made by elected boards of education that are accountable to the public. The League also believes that to ensure quality, all schools that receive state funds should comply with the same state standards, such as Operating Standards for Ohio's Schools (Chapter 3301-35 Ohio Administrative Code), Ohio's education accountability system, and Ohio Teacher Licensure Standards.

Community schools and voucher programs are promoted here in Ohio as options for parents to choose for the education of their children, but community schools comply with different laws, rules, and regulations, and are accountable to appointed governing boards and sponsors, many of which are not annually evaluated.

Achieve, Inc. and McKinsey & Company note in their report "Creating a World-Class Education System in Ohio" (February 2007) that Ohio's education system is a "patchwork of multiple systems" that expose students to "market risk" from "...bad schools because no attempt is made to shut down poor providers or to limit entry of the school market based on past performance." (p. 67) This report recommends that Ohio establish a choice system that has "...a set of entry rules, operating rules, and exit rules that provide universal accountability while allowing local flexibility." (p. 69).

The League is encouraged by recent legislation (HB 119 and 126-HB79) and the language in SB 141 that strengthens accountability requirements for community schools and sponsors; clarifies the roles and responsibilities of sponsors, boards of directors, and management companies; better aligns community schools with the rules and regulations followed by traditional public schools; strengthens financial accountability; and sets enrollment targets for start-up community schools.

We also support provisions in SB 141 that clarify authority, responsibilities, and consequences. This bill clearly states that the Ohio Department of Education has the authority to oversee and monitor all community school sponsors, and permits the Department of Education to place a sponsor in probationary status, or suspend, or restrict a sponsor's authority to sponsor community schools for failure to intervene to correct problems at a school. Sponsors have the authority to close a school or not renew a contract due to the school's performance as outlined in HB 79.

The bill also directs the ODE to report annually the performance of community school sponsors. Currently it is unclear what criteria sponsors are using to renew community school contracts or provide intervention and assistance to community schools.

The League supports a standard format for all sponsors to use to evaluate the academic, operational, and financial conditions of the community schools that they sponsor, and publication of the results of this evaluation annually on the ODE web site. The Office of Community Schools is piloting a sponsor evaluation tool that could be expanded in the future to include all sponsors if this bill is approved.

Some of the information in this tool, for example Legal Compliance, is already being published online in the annual report on community schools released in December 2007. This report provides important information for families making decisions about community schools, but not all sponsors submit information. More can be done to close loop holes in charter school law that have made it difficult to uniformly ensure quality and accountability to students, parents, and the public.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Sub. SB 141. We look forward to working with members of the General Assembly to ensure that Ohio's public education system provides Ohio's students with quality educational opportunities, and is responsive and accountable to the public.