



## THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF SOUTH CAROLINA

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### Testimony to the SC Senate K-12 Education Subcommittee In opposition to the SC Education Opportunity Bill (S. 520)

The League of Women Voters of South Carolina (LWVSC) has long held that all children deserve access to a high quality education and that given the appropriate resources, all children can achieve academic success. It is within the power of this Legislature to provide the opportunity to all children to reach their highest potential through an adequately and equitably funded public school system.

LWVSC opposes passage of S.520 allowing a tax credit or voucher to pay for tuition at a private school or at another public school. The proposal has some appeal until we consider that the “opportunity” is limited to children who receive scholarships from corporate donors or for families with sufficient income to benefit from a tax credit, who can afford to pay the cost of tuition in excess of the tax credit, who can advance the entire tuition in July or August and wait months for tax credit reimbursement. It will not benefit families in rural areas where no private schools are in reasonable proximity. It does not represent “opportunity” for children who cannot pass a private school entrance exam or for handicapped children living where there are no appropriate private facilities.

The negatives of S.520 far outweigh its modest benefits. It diverts funds that public school systems need to serve the most disadvantaged students. Recent shortfalls in tax revenue have caused the Legislature to repeatedly reduce the amount of funds promised to our public schools. A tax credit program would introduce another unpredictable reduction in revenue. Additionally, the State will incur the cost of creating a monitoring mechanism to evaluate participating private and parochial schools.

LWVSC calls upon the Legislature to act now to institute reforms that will strengthen the public schools. Update per pupil funding formulas based on an assessment of what it costs to provide an education appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and weighted to provide real opportunity for disadvantaged and physically and intellectually challenged children. Reform the State’s tax structure so that funding for public schools is stable, predictable, equitable; return a measure of autonomy and budget control to school districts. Remove unnecessary regulations and consolidate conflicting grant programs to encourage cost efficiency. Afford school districts the discretion to allocate funds to meet the needs of their student population and encourage innovation.

Empirical evidence abounds that investing in public education is a powerful economic development strategy. Well-educated children become competent employees and attract industry and commercial enterprises to locate in South Carolina. They earn more--and therefore spend more--than students who don’t finish high school. They are less likely to be incarcerated, to engage in antisocial, destructive behavior or require access to welfare or other social service programs. It costs less to educate our children well than to provide services and facilities to meet the needs of poorly educated adults.

The proposal to offer tax credits and vouchers diverts attention from the core issue of how to bring public schools in South Carolina up to an acceptable level. We cannot solve the problem of failing schools by turning our backs on them. Only through a well supported public school system can the State of South Carolina provide all children access to a high quality education. Most parents, if given a choice, would elect to send their children to a top-notch neighborhood school. Let’s devote our money and energy to making all of our schools top-notch.

*The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.*