

To: ALL LEAGUES for Your Program Planning

RE: PROPOSED 2009-2011 LWV US STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

PROPOSAL: To study the role of the federal government in public education, with a focus on (1) the basic goals of public education, (2) the role of the federal government in education policy-making, (3) the relationship between national, state, and local levels of education governance, including funding, and (4) the development of common standards.

PURPOSE: To establish national League positions that would enable the League of Women Voters to

- review, consider, evaluate and advocate for or against federal education legislation; to
- advocate on issues related to what the federal role in public education should be; and to
- join in coalition with other national organizations that speak out on issues of public education.

LEAGUE STATUS QUO: Currently, LWV US addresses education issues only as they are covered by other national Social Policy positions, regarding fairness, and access to equal opportunity for women, minorities and for classes of students requiring special protection or resources—poor children, special needs children, English learners (EL), and others currently denied equal educational opportunity. As education has historically been the responsibility of the individual states and school districts, studying and acting on education issues has been left to Leagues within these jurisdictions. A table summarizing current state League education positions can be found at <http://www.sclaraco.calwvnet.org>.

BACKGROUND: The federal government is already heavily involved in funding, and establishing policy for all school districts receiving federal dollars. The Defense of Education Act of 1958 broke a long-standing taboo against direct federal aid to education.

Before the current economic crunch, national direct investment averaged about 10% of state-level K-12 education budgets across a wide range of programs, from Head Start and reduced-price school lunches to support for career education, homeless children, foster children and special education students. The recently reauthorized Higher Education Act addresses opportunities for many more students to afford college.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally passed in 1965, (known in its 2002 renewal as No Child Left Behind) is itself currently undergoing major restructuring before it can be reauthorized. Data on the powerful effect of pre-school learning has also brought federal initiatives to expand educational opportunities for very young children.

Evidence from all over the country reveals that resources and levels of support are very unequally distributed among the states, within states and school districts. Everywhere, ineffective, and/or under-funded schools have been concentrated in neighborhoods with large populations of poor, and non-English speaking immigrants. Dropout rates averaging 25-30% across a state grow to more than 50% in these neighborhoods.

An overarching concern with the quality and amount of learning achieved by our high school graduates has focused attention on the misalignment of existing high-school graduation requirements and the preparation students will need to succeed in the workplace and post-secondary education. Education organizations representing education professionals, elected officials and private-sector executives have taken on the voluntary challenge of creating a set of national educational standards or guidelines to be used by states to replace the current individual state standards.

RATIONALE: Across the country, education has been caught in the perfect storm of our current economic crisis. People are losing their jobs, their homes, their health insurance and their savings all at the same time. The recession has compounded the widespread misery by severely reducing state and local revenues.

Funding for public education, which at one time came mostly from local property taxes (and still does in many localities), is now underwritten in most parts of the country by state income and sales taxes. When unemployment is high, tax revenue from these sources plummet.

Even as educational resources at the state and local level have shrunk, observers pointing to the weak performance of U.S. students in standard international tests, are calling for millions more college graduates to fill the professional positions being vacated by retiring Baby Boomers if we are to retain our standing in the global economy.

The new administration's stimulus package (The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or ARRA) is attempting to address the present contractions in state and local government revenues with large infusions of money attached to conditions requiring greater accountability. To help states sustain school budgets, \$55 billion has been allocated for education. Far more than in the past, the federal government is becoming involved in making policy as well as funding programs that will affect state and local school operations directly.

The League's basic, long-standing commitment to social policy issues such as children and families, equality of opportunity, and good government underscores the need to involve ourselves with how these far-reaching changes in education will be shaped at the national level. Currently we have very little by way of relevant positions that enable us to speak directly to federal policy decisions affecting public schools. While there are many other constituent groups addressing education, we are uniquely positioned to advocate with a national public education position that will not be biased toward one stakeholder or another.

COST: We believe that most of the work of a study committee can be conducted like the immigration study—with online discussions and reporting, and conference calls. We estimate the cost of this two-year study to approximate the cost of the immigration study—mainly LWVUS staff time—for \$30,000 to \$35,000.

Thank you for your consideration.

Doris Petersen, Nan Prince and Nancy Rogers, Palo Alto; Ellen Wheeler, Los Altos/Mountain View; Helene Lecar, Berkeley/Albany; Joanne Leavitt, Santa Monica