

League of Women Voters of New Mexico Study

Charter School Regulations: Public School Funding, Accountability, and Transparency

Scope of Study: In the context of the growing emphasis of some governmental policy-makers on promoting charter schools, this study will review information regarding the regulations and policies from which charter schools are released to determine if the exemptions from regulations may impede the progress of traditional public schools and the sufficiency of funding for public schools. Because charter schools are publicly funded, the study raises the question of whether they should be held to standards of accountability and transparency that are at least as rigorous as those of traditional public schools. The study will also examine the need for changes in charter school regulations regarding their missions (which now allow adults to get their high school credentials, have specialized curricula, and alternative assessments), their governing bodies (which are not publicly elected or complying with the Open Meetings Act), their operations (which are not publicly audited), and rules for authorization and reauthorization.

Rationale: Many policy experts and League members in the state and across the country have identified the following areas of concern regarding charter schools: the issue of equitable and adequate funding of public education, the financial impact on school districts, and privatization and profit-making with public education dollars. Charters place financial pressure on the system and have uneven academic and operational performance. In New Mexico, a charter school must be public, nonsectarian, nonreligious, and non-home based. Though a charter school is required to be organized and operated as a nonprofit corporation, its unelected governing body can hire a for-profit management organization to run the school. Countless studies have been conducted by educational researchers examining effects of charter schools. Many of these are being considered in creating a proposed position as are the findings of studies conducted by numerous state and local Leagues. Recent events in New Mexico and across the nation suggest that more oversight and accountability may be needed to increase charter schools' transparency and compliance with requirements that apply to traditional public schools. This study will not attempt to resolve the issue of whether charter schools or traditional public schools achieve better student outcomes or offer more choice to families. There are excellent charter schools, just as there are excellent traditional public schools. The goal of this study is to determine what steps should be taken to tighten charter school regulations so that such problems do not continue to arise, given that charter schools will be part of the public education landscape for the foreseeable future. We are facing a critical shortfall in state funding for public education. Our Education position allows us to continue to advocate for adequate and equitable school funding, but we are unable to address the causes and effects of the increasing insufficiency until we examine what is happening with the proliferation of charter schools and the lack of accountability in what gets authorized, funded, and allowed to continue to operate without the same accountability as traditional public schools.

Expected Outcome: Once we reach a position through consensus, the League will be able to advocate for or against proposed legislation. This study has already increased League visibility and helped us link with individuals and groups representing different viewpoints and groups that are underrepresented in League. Charter school issues are of statewide importance and will stimulate the involvement of members and may attract potential members.

Timeline:

2015

March: Initial concept of study approved by LWVNM Board.

May: Convention delegates approved the study

Summer and Fall: Identified a charter school study committee and shared preliminary materials acquired through research and reports collected by NM Legislative Education Study Committee staff and proposed legislation. Determined questions to ask some of the legislators who served on the LESC Subcommittee on Charter Schools to explore their concerns. Conduct electronic and in-person meetings with study committee members.

2016

Winter: Explore charter schools and the work of the Public Education Charter School Division and the Public Education Commission.

Spring: Narrow the study to major concerns. Develop consensus questions for LWVNM Board approval. Schedule two-hour consensus meetings with local Leagues to get perspectives about charter school regulatory issues. Meet with local league members to share information on the issues in advance of consensus meetings. Share findings with the state Board and Council delegates.

Summer-Fall: The state study committee will compile results of local leagues' consensus studies and draft a position. The consensus results and draft position statements will be presented to the LWVNM Board, which will accept or amend the wording of the proposed position. Once adopted, the LWVNM Action Committee will be able to use it during the Legislative session and as needed.

2017

May: Position will be brought before Convention delegates for adoption or amendment.

Communication: Summaries of findings will be included in each bimonthly LWVNM Board meeting and in each quarterly La Palabra, so the general membership can learn about the issues.

Study Leader: Meredith Machen

Dr. Machen is the President of the League of Women Voters of New Mexico and its Education Chair. Before becoming active with the League, she was an educator for 38 years. In addition to teaching English and Human Development courses, she administered numerous programs, many of which were aimed at helping educationally and economically disadvantaged community members succeed. At Santa Fe Community College, where she worked for 25 years, she headed the Educational Leadership division which focused on teacher training, academic preparation and enrichment, service-learning, prevention programs, civic engagement, social advocacy, and improving education at the district, state, and national levels. Meredith has served on several educational policy committees ranging from early childhood development through higher education including high school/college curriculum alignment, articulation, academic preparation, access, dual credit, assessment, and student outcomes. In addition to her statewide work, she participates in the LWV Education Committee, which researches and analyzes public education policy, legislation, and programs. She earned her B.A. at Boston University and her M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of New Mexico.