



PO BOX 8453, COLUMBIA, SC, 29202, (803) 636-0431, WWW.LWVSC.ORG

TESTIMONY: H. 4879 BEFORE THE REVENUE POLICY LEGISLATIVE SUBCOMMITTEE

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I am Dr. Janelle Rivers, Education Advocacy Specialist for the League of Women Voters of South Carolina. My professional background is especially relevant to evaluating the accountability provisions of H. 4879.

My Ph.D. is in Educational Research, which means that my expertise is in assessment construction and research design. I retired after 18 years as Director of Assessment and Accountability in Lexington One. Prior to that I was an administrator in Richland One and at the South Carolina Department of Education, administering programs for teacher and student assessment. Long before that I was a classroom teacher.

The League of Women Voters of South Carolina opposes efforts to divert state money to private schools, although we do support providing parents and students with expanded choices within the public school system. If public funds are used, then participating schools should not be permitted to exclude students because of religion, gender, or disability status. Also, families with limited income would struggle or fail to stretch their budgets to make up the difference between the funds that this bill might offer and the average cost of private school tuition plus transportation expenses.

I will focus on the accountability provisions of H. 4879, which require that students attend a school “where the students attending are administered national achievement or state standardized tests, or both, at progressive grade levels to determine student progress.” Using the standardized criterion-referenced achievement tests that are administered to students taking the same coursework in public schools is appropriate and commendable. That will work well as a measure of academic accountability because the resulting scores can be compared with performance of students in public schools. Except for students with very severe disabilities, special needs students can be permitted accommodations that will allow them to take the same state assessments as students in regular classrooms.

On the other hand, a “national achievement” test is not an acceptable alternative. Nationally marketed norm-referenced achievement tests are not designed to determine skill levels with respect to South Carolina academic standards or give parents enough information to make informed choices. Instead, norm-referenced tests are constructed to compare the performance of an individual student to the performance of students in a pre-determined peer group at some time in the past. The norming group is generally dependent on the ability of test publishers to convince schools or districts anywhere in the United States to administer extra assessments to their students for the purpose of test development.

The problem with using norm-referenced tests for accountability was revealed by John Jacob Cannell, a West Virginia doctor who used the term “Lake Wobegon Effect” to describe the 1988 study in which he canvassed all 50 states and found no state where performance on norm-referenced tests was below average. Theoretically, we might expect half of the states to be above average and half below average. What could create a condition that would allow all states to claim to be above average? The answer lies in the way norm-referenced tests are constructed and the fact that the same test forms may be used year after year.

League of Women Voters of South Carolina supports more choices for students within a strong and accountable public school system; however, we oppose the current H.4879 plan to create Education Scholarship Accounts.

Contact: Janelle Rivers, Ph.D., Education Advocacy Specialist, LWVSC  
803 667-6610 rivers12@bellsouth.net