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TESTIMONY: S. 285

BEFORE THE HOUSE REVENUE POLICY LEGISLATIVE SUBCOMMITTEE

May 4, 2023

I am Dr. Janelle Rivers, Education Advocacy Specialist for the League of Women Voters of South Carolina, and a retired South Carolina educator and administrator with four grandchildren who attend South Carolina public schools.

The League of Women Voters of South Carolina has consistently opposed any mechanism that diverts public money to private schools. The South Carolina General Assembly has already passed Senate Bill 39, authorizing a program that will expand annually to send state funds directly to parents via Education Scholarship Accounts. Within three academic years, that bill could divert as much as 90 million dollars in public funds to private and religious schools every year.

Senate Bill 285 proposes another mechanism, tax credits that fund scholarships, to send even more money to private and religious schools. The mechanism is different, but the net effect is the same. The approximately 100 million dollars of income tax credits that could be awarded to scholarship donors under the proposed program is 100 million dollars that will not go into the state treasury.

That is the cost of this proposal. So, what we are buying with this very substantial investment of public funds? The answer is that we would never really know. The proposal would not allow us to measure that well enough to know whether our money was well spent.

The omission of accountability and evaluation requirements from this bill leaves the State of South Carolina without any mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the program. The bill contains no testing requirements, and there is no way to aggregate performance data for the students who might receive the Academic Choice in Education (ACE) scholarships if the bill is enacted.

However, there is one aspect of the proposal that allows us to see that we would not be buying what South Carolina needs. These scholarship funds are not accessible to all students in South Carolina. The bill prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin, but it would allow receiving schools to discriminate against students on the basis of religion, gender, disability, or academic aptitude. A school that succeeds by rejecting students who need help

simply drains resources from those who need it most and gives those resources to students who could succeed in any reasonable educational environment.

Recently, the General Assembly has begun to address the problem of underfunded public schools, but there is much more to be done. Enacting a program like the one described in Senate Bill 285 reduces the funds available to address the needs of the public schools and the concomitant issues of poverty and public health. By diverting funds that would otherwise go into the general coffers, this bill will diminish the quality of life for South Carolina's most vulnerable citizens.

Please vote against S.285. The League of Women Voters of South Carolina urges you to look instead for ways to support and improve South Carolina's public schools.

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