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TESTIMONY: S. 935 BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION 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 S.935.

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. The accountability provisions in S.935 are extraordinarily weak.

Norm-referenced tests are constructed to compare the performance of an individual student to the performance of students in a pre-determined peer group. Norm-reference tests are not suitable instruments for determining the degree to which students have mastered a set of academic standards because items for norm-referenced tests are chosen based on the performance of a sample group of students at some point in the past. The norming group is generally dependent on the ability of test publishers to convince schools or districts 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.

Criterion-referenced tests are constructed differently because their purpose is to determine how well students are performing with respect to content standards. Criterion-referenced tests are based on curricular expectations, and it is criterion-referenced tests, not norm-referenced tests, that are appropriate for public accountability. Adequately assessing the progress of an individual student requires two test forms that measure the content standards for the grade level and that have been equated on the same scale.

Norm-referenced tests cannot give parents enough information to make informed choices. 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 and that will yield scores that can be interpreted with respect to how well these students are meeting state standards.

In addition, any program that receives state funds should be accountable to taxpayers. Programs that receive state funds should be required to administer the same assessments as those that are used to assess progress for comparable students in the public schools.

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 roughly seven-thousand-dollar average cost of private school tuition.

We support revision of the state funding formula to provide more choices for students within a strong public school system; however, we oppose the S.935 plan to create Education Scholarship Accounts managed under contract by a private entity without meaningful public accountability.

The League of Women Votes of South Carolina requests that you vote against S. 935.

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