

Public Education Funding is Inadequate

Last month approximately 100 citizens attended an educational program on the impact of state funding on their local public schools. Co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters in Orange, Durham and Chatham Counties and NCCU School of Education, the forum featured the four school superintendents in the three counties who, after brief, informative presentations, responded to audience questions. While each superintendent made it clear that local county commissioners are supportive of education and are using whatever means available to shore up inadequate state funds, each also painted a picture of a long term decline in state support that should move all citizens to action. While the issues are complex and deserving of close study, a few highlights help illustrate the urgency of the situation.

At the same time charter schools are proliferating, the regular public schools are left to address the needs of all students. In addition to demands related to poverty, a range of exceptional learning and behavioral needs and increasing expectations and aspirations for responsive and personalized services for students and families put pressure on school systems that are already suffering from reductions and diversions of funds.

While educators acknowledged the increased salaries for beginning teachers, significant concerns remain about inadequate and uneven funding for recruiting and retaining educational professionals and support staff. Furthermore, funding for instructional materials, educational technology, professional development, and facility maintenance is inadequate. Major renovations of aging and deteriorating facilities are badly needed.

Since 1970, the public schools' share of the state's General Fund has decreased by 15.2 percent, from 82.5 percent in 1969-70 to 37.3 percent from 2012 to 2014. If public schools were still funded at the same percentage as in 1969-70, there would be an additional \$3.05 billion available to educate students (NC Dept. of Public Instruction). In addition, the change in the funding model, previously based on projected enrollments has, in most cases, had a negative impact on planning for enrollment growth. Planning is also made more difficult by charter schools, because the district has no input in their formation. As students move to charter schools, including charter schools outside of the county, the county funding follows the student, thus reducing the amount available for the local public schools.

The panel members spoke to the even greater burden that has fallen on some of the poorer districts in the state because of their lack of sufficient supplementary funds to offset the reductions in state funding. Whereas Orange County provides over \$4,000 per pupil, some poor counties in NC provide no supplement, yet their schools are being held to the same standards. All of these factors have negatively impacted our traditional schools.

For North Carolina students to compete in the 21st century, it is imperative that our public schools provide up-to-date technology and instructional resources. In addition, the public must demand that, at minimum, our students have a learning environment that is safe, secure and healthy.

The League of Women Voters supports quality education for all students, and adequate funding of our public schools is a necessary though not sufficient condition. An educated citizenry is the foundation upon which our democratic society is based. Therefore, it is imperative that the public support our public schools by demanding that the state provide adequate funding, as required in the North Carolina Constitution. Toward this end, we urge all citizens to access the

expertise and experience of district administrators and board of education members in order to remain informed and to hold their elected officials accountable for supporting the public schools.

Brenda Rogers, President

League of Women Voters of Orange, Durham and Chatham Counties