



## ***A STUDY OF MANDATED TESTING IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF TEXAS***

High-stakes testing in our public schools is an issue that has gained growing attention in recent years.

To gather information about testing and accountability in Texas public schools, the League of Women Voters of Texas (LWV-TX) initiated a study at its biennial convention in April 2006. The findings from the study, *Mandated Testing in the Public Schools of Texas*, should help League members and the public answer questions about the pros and cons of these standardized tests.

Supporters of mandated testing say it provides a way to make the public schools more accountable and to ensure that efforts are made to raise the educational level of all students, not just those who are easier to educate. Testing that measures student achievement by subgroups--for example, by ethnic and low-income groups--helps focus attention on equity and the unique instructional needs of the students in the specific subgroups.

Critics of mandated testing maintain that there is too much teaching to the test. There are concerns about the pressure to perform well and the resulting stress on students, teachers, and administrators. Some educators think that too much time is taken up by testing on the core subjects, leaving little time for other subjects and for the development of critical thinking skills and creativity.

Achievement tests have long been used in schools, but mandatory achievement testing and associated accountability ratings are more recent practices. Texas has been at the forefront of the movement. And now a federal accountability system is in place, alongside the state system.

The League of Women Voters is in a unique position to find out what testing practices are currently in place in Texas and what effects they are having on our public education system--the bedrock of our democracy. The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization that promotes political responsibility through informed and active participation in government. Because the League is a multi-issue organization, its studies and positions are highly respected by legislators and the public as not having a bias or special interest.

A committee of 13 League members across the state, which includes two co-chairs, is conducting the study. Among the 13 are a physician, a journalist, teachers, school board members, a school administrator, a professor emeritus who is a member of the Content Validation Committee for the English language arts section of TAKS, and others with a

strong interest in education and the public schools. It has begun its work to examine the following questions:

- How often must mandated achievement tests be administered to determine the accountability of students and districts?
- How are higher-level thinking skills measured on the test, and how is the difficulty measured?
- Has testing been effective in narrowing the gap in achievement among various subgroups?
- What is the impact of testing on teacher time?
- What is the monetary cost of testing to the state and to local districts?

In the process of studying an issue statewide, the League incurs certain expenses. The state study committee meets periodically; and their travel, as well as telephone, computer, and supplies, are an expense to the League and its members. The staff in the League's state office spends time in support of the study, which is allocated to the cost of the study. The Board of Trustees for the League of Women Voters of Texas Education Fund oversees the study. The League sends the committee's final report, called *Facts & Issues*, to each of its members in the state, as well as to other interested parties, which include legislators and educational groups.

This report on mandated testing in the public schools will examine the issue from all sides. Only after it is published, will League members come to a consensus of opinion on which to state a position. Because there are so many stakeholders involved in the field of education, the League anticipates printing many more *Facts & Issues* than usual.

In addition, the 32 local Leagues in Texas may pursue additional study on the issue. Some will hold general meetings for the public in which experts and education professionals are brought in to discuss all sides of the issue. Most will have local discussion groups with a resource person to consider the issue and share opinions. When funds permit, LWV-TX creates pass-through grants to enable local Leagues to plan and publicize excellent programs that will benefit the public's understanding of this issue.

The timeline for this study is as follows:

June 06-April 07:	Committee research
April 07-July 07:	Develop leaders guide and consensus questions
July 07- August 07:	Publish <i>Facts &amp; Issues</i>
August 07:	Distribute <i>Facts &amp; Issues</i> to local League members
Sept. 07-Nov. 07:	Local Leagues hold consensus meetings
January 08:	Board approves position, if there is consensus

This study also may have implications for the federal No Child Left Behind Act. There has been some concern that this national legislation presented an unfunded mandate to local school districts. While this study is not primarily focused on that issue, it may provide background for further study on that subject.