

**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF INDIANA
EDUCATION STUDY: STANDARDIZED TESTING**

CONSENSUS REPORT FOR LWV BROWN COUNTY

At its 2015 Convention in Brown County, League of Women Voters of Indiana adopted a two-year education study. The first year involved a concurrence (which was approved): League of Women Voters of Indiana supports a free, publicly - funded, nonsectarian system of schools serving all the state's children from pre-school through 12th grade. The state Board approved that statement (making it part of LWVIN's statewide position) in February 2016.

The study's second year entails examining state- and nationally-mandated standardized testing of public school pupils + its costs, uses, and effects. Six consensus questions were submitted to each local league for discussion and reporting.

The membership of the League of Women Voters of Brown County met Wednesday, January 25, 2017, to discuss and reach consensus on the questions submitted by the state League's Study Committee. Materials collected and prepared by the State League Study Committee were circulated in advance, and a different member of the Board of LWVBC took responsibility for leading the discussion of each question. A Board subcommittee met ahead of time with Brown County School Superintendent Dr. Laura Hammack to review her reactions to the questions; she also attended the first half of the consensus meeting.

General: Two important points came up repeatedly in our discussion and these should be considered a part of Brown County's response across the board. **First**, we were unanimous in finding that formative testing (both standardized, like the NWEA, and ad hoc in the form of quizzes administered by teachers in their own classrooms) is useful in gathering data for a number of valid purposes. However, we were skeptical about the value of standardized summative testing for most purposes (other than, say, SAT/ACT for college readiness), since even its gauge of what a student knows on a particular day is subject to variables outside the student's control. Both proficiency and growth against the standards are important, and summative tests once a year with results a year later do nothing to reflect growth. **Second**, most of us (but not all) feel that high-stakes standardized tests should, if used at all, be required of all students, including those in charter schools and vouchered private schools, although it might not be possible to reach the home-schooled.

Results and Discussion:

1. For what purposes should the State of Indiana require testing of children in the public schools? Which aims should be considered appropriate and which (if any) inappropriate?

- a. To determine the individual child's progress*
- b. To compare the child's scores to scores of peers*
- c. To adjust and improve instruction*
- d. To evaluate teachers*
- e. To evaluate schools*
- f. Other (Explain.)*

Response:

LWVBC believes it is appropriate to require testing of all children through the use of standardized formative tests that measure growth against standards, for the purposes listed at (a) and (c) above. It is further fair to use the data collected to compare the individual child's scores against the standards, but some members (not all) were concerned about comparison against peers. Provided formative testing is used, we accept the use of collected data in teacher and school evaluations provided it is only one of a number of elements applied in such assessment and provided standardized test results are not used in a punitive manner. Several of our number are also concerned that the cost to the state of ISTEP is too high (various figures are used, but are in the tens of millions), and that other standardized tests might be better for less cost.

Discussion:

Our group heard from Superintendent Hammack about the effects of ISTEP and also a formative series of tests which could be given (NWEA) – discussion of formative vs summative tests. After lengthy discussion the group decided that all the options for data use were important but not to the same level of priority. Several would replace the wording “compare child to scores of peers” to compare scores to grade level standards. Most, but not all of us, felt that formative standardized testing should be given to all Indiana students whose schools are receiving tax monies. A great deal of concern was expressed about ISTEP, especially now that it seems likely it will remain in effect a couple more years – the summative nature of the test, the fact that it takes days and days away from classroom work, the consistent delay in results which render it useless for any benefits to the student, and the difficulties in fair administration. All these were reasons it should be abandoned as quickly as possible AND should not be used to evaluate teachers or schools effective immediately.

2. Who should be responsible for selecting required tests?

- a. State Legislators*
- b. Staff at Indiana Department of Education (Superintendent of Public Instruction's office)*
- c. State Board of Education*
- d. Educators employed in public school corporations*

e. Committees of parents and school board members

f. Other (Explain.)

Response:

LWVBC came to consensus that personnel and staff at the Indiana Department of Education (b) along with educators employed in public school corporations (d) should be responsible for selection of standardized tests. In addition, we thought it would be appropriate for the Indiana Superintendents Association to have a role (other). The group was somewhat split on a role for committees of parents and schools board members but largely rejected that option.

Discussion:

There was a lengthy discussion of political and financial influence as well as competency of the various above categories. We are eager that educators and professionals in education have the largest role in selecting tests. Parents, while they want the best for their children, are not well-informed or qualified on methods of student assessment, and school boards are not always populated by experts in education either. Involvement by local superintendents and educators can address and alleviate local concerns. The amount of money and lobbying in the testing business was repellent to many of us, with the result we would like to see legislators out of this role.

3. How frequently should individual students be required to take such tests (e.g., every year, or at education "set points" such as 3rd grade)? Should random sampling be considered, rather than requiring every student to take the tests?

Response:

Formative standardized tests for which there is rapid feedback to the teacher can be done each year and as often as three times a year. Summative tests such as the now given ISTEP are not accurate or timely in assessing child, school or teacher progress. Random testing might allow some students to fall through the cracks -- while it might be useful as a quick check of school progress, it does not help in determining an individual student's progress nor in evaluating and improving instruction.

Discussion:

Our main concerns are getting quick, useful information that benefits the student, and not taking too much time out of classroom work. ISTEP obviously fails these standards. Random testing still takes some students out of the classroom, and means further time to catch them up later, so why?

4. *How much time should be subtracted from regular instruction for mandated testing? (This would include preparation, administration, make-ups, etc. For example, if 10% of the school year were approved for testing, that would be 18 days of Indiana's 180-day school year.) To account for the lost instructional time, should adjustments be made to curriculum expectations?*

Response:

We did not arrive at an optimal number of hours/days. It all depends on what kind of testing (summative or formative) is selected. Ideally, teachers teach to grade and course standards and not to test questions/methodologies, and thus no time is taken away from real learning. Some time to acquaint children with testing process is acceptable. We did not address the question of adjustments to curriculum expectations in the discussion, but all present were dissatisfied at the idea of losing time to too much standardized testing vs having the time for more in-depth and broader actual education on subject matter.

Discussion:

The heavy testing burden as it now exists has led to heavy administrative costs to the school systems and created extra, unneeded work. Computer skills should be taught as a necessary part of the curriculum, not just as part of "taking a test."

5. *What provisions could insure that all children are tested fairly?*

- a. Timing*
- b. Learning styles*
- c. Language of origin*
- d. Special-education designations*
- e. Socio-economic status*
- f. Rural vs. urban issues*
- g. Available technology*
- h. Students' computer skills*
- i. Other? (Explain.)*

Response:

All of the above are important to ensuring fair testing. LWVBC believes that a local team, comprised of Title 1 and special ed teachers, as well as school administration, could best judge how or whether it is possible to accommodate certain needs/gaps, but in many cases that is hard to do. We do not believe that ISTAR should be artificially limited to 2% of students and we call for IMAST to be reinstated for special ed students.

Discussion:

The state should not artificially limit how many children get what tests or on what technology they are to be administered. Paper and pencil tests could suffice at testing course and grade levels in many cases, and in any event, computer availability and/or skills should not be factors in students' success/lack thereof on a test – internet connectivity can be a real issue not only on test day, but for many students' homes. There is inherent test bias that may affect students of different socio-economic status or who are on one side or the other of the urban-rural divide. The test or kind of test selected has a role to play in this question as well. We discussed the role of vouchers/charter schools in siphoning off selected students, which means administrators and teachers much make more accommodations for those remaining in public school.

6. What (if any) role should mandated test results have in evaluating teachers?

Response:

Teachers need to be given the resources, tools and support they need to be effective. Provided good-quality formative tests that yield real time useful results are selected for high-stakes testing, then the data they provide can be used as one element of a multi-faceted teacher evaluation, including evaluation for salary purposes. Great care must be taken, however, because use of test results in evaluation and compensation invites cheating. ISTEP is not doing the job as even failing schools have good teachers. Formative tests such as NWEA provide real time children's progress versus ISTEP whose results often come a year too late and take up way more time. Principals have a role in helping to define student growth values.