



WATCHDOG

2013 Fall/Winter Issue

Message From the President

The Weber County League has had an excellent beginning to the year. While the weather was not great (surprise, surprise) at the Membership Potluck, the speaker was excellent. In an effort to be as prepared as possible to reach consensus on the state education study, Lou Shurtliff, former educator and legislator, spoke to us regarding how education is funded. She is awesome at making a tough topic seem very easy to understand. Her information helped us to understand some of the material in the study. We thank her for her willingness to always give of herself.

Our September meeting was led by Marilyn O'Dell, member of the study board, and we reached consensus on the project "Funding Utah Public Education." The consensus is included in this issue for all to read.

We also registered voters on September 24 for National Voter Registration Day. Many thanks to Harmons and Lynnda Wangsgard at the Weber County Library for allowing us to do this activity at their location. It was actually fun and we felt we were successful.

We had to move the November meeting to November 18, 2013 at 7:00 p.m. at Pleasant Valley Library. Our speaker is Azenett Garza, who is a new member, and the topic will be the Ogden United Promise Project. Azenett is the director of the Ogden United Promise Neighborhood project and will talk about the program. Ogden is gathering statistics and will apply for a 35 million dollar grant next year based on this information to implement this program. This project fosters neighborhood development and education to improve the perception and quality of the educational and community systems in the area. Together the neighborhood will improve the school system and increase involvement. This ought to be very interesting, and I would love to see everyone there.

On a sad note for our League, Carol McCormick is leaving us to pursue the next chapter of her life in Idaho, close to her family. We wish her well, but are very sad to see her leave us. She has been a member and co-treasurer for many years, and she will be missed very much.

As the holidays approach all too quickly, I want to take this opportunity to thank you all for the things you have done for the league. Weber County League is a viable one in the state due to the members we have. I appreciate the opportunity to work with such dedicated, intelligent people.

On a personal note, I wish all of you a wonderful holiday season. Please be safe and remember you are a valued member of this group. May peace and hope be with you all.

Terri McCulloch



Membership Dues

It is that time of year again to pay our membership dues. If you have not already done so, please do it now. They are \$45 dollars and go to Evelyn Bertilson at 1047 East 5675 South, Ogden UT 84405. Don't put it off – do it now! We need you!





Mail in Voting

By Ember Herrick

Weber County held a Special Election in June that was conducted primarily by mail. With a 31% voter turnout rate, we feel it was a great success and warrants further evaluation as a possible solution to the low voter turnout seen in Weber County and throughout the state of Utah.

To capitalize on low interest rates, the bond issue for the library needed to be decided sooner than a November election. The predicament for Weber County Commissioners was being confident that a majority of citizens voiced their opinion in the decision. Historically, Primary Elections have a very low voter turnout with 13.4% being the six-year average. There was no data to draw on for a Special Election but the 2008 Western States Primary, with only one race on the ballot, drew a paltry 3.77% of voters.

After researching the vote-by-mail experience in the states of Washington and Oregon, our office felt confident that conducting an election entirely by mail was worth trying and would give every registered voter the opportunity to weigh in on the issue regardless of work schedules, vacation, transportation, or health issues. We acknowledged that some individuals like the experience of coming to the polls and some voters may not get a ballot because they haven't updated their voter registration record with a current address. Because of this, we decided to create a hybrid election where six (6) Election Day Vote Centers would be available in addition to the mailed ballot.

The 30 days leading up to the June 25th Special Election were some of the most intense days we've experienced in our office. With ballots coming in by the hundreds each day, our team did an excellent job validating and processing each one to ensure the integrity of the voting process while still maintaining the right to cast a secret ballot. The success of this undertaking was evident on Election Day. Normally I spend most of the day on the phone fielding phone calls and text messages from poll workers and voters. These run the gamut from technical problems with laptops and voting machines to frustrated voters who have stood in line at the wrong location or been asked to vote a provisional ballot.

June 25th was eerily quiet. Our biggest challenge was finding ways to fight off boredom for the 26 poll workers we had stationed at polling locations

throughout the county. In total, 691 voters turned out on Election Day to vote in the traditional format with 31,288 choosing to cast their ballot by mail or by placing it in a secure ballot drop box.

Here is the summary of votes cast:

Summary of Votes Cast

Polling Place	691	0.67%
By-Mail	31,288	30.42%
Total	31,979	31.09%

I think voting by mail deserves strong consideration as the next platform for voting. It solves the dilemma we are facing of aging voting equipment and brings a ballot directly to those who find coming to a polling place on Election Day difficult. It also gives voters more time with the ballot and additional opportunity to research candidates and issues. Ideally this means a thoughtful and well informed choice can be made without the pressure of poll workers or a line of voters waiting for you to be done.



Thank You Carol McCormick

We are very sad to see a long standing member and co-treasurer leave us. Carol has been an active member for many years and supported this organization. She was a leveling, person of humility on our take charge board, and when she offered advice, it was beneficial to listen. She is moving to Idaho to be closer to family. We wish her well and want to thank her for her dedicated support to our League.

Count My Vote

The Utah League voted and unanimously chooses to support the Count My Vote initiative earlier this year. This organization is heading a citizen’s initiative to replace the state’s caucus and convention system centered on political parties to a direct primary election. This would involve more voters. The state used to have a position that stated that we supported the caucus system, but this was recently changed at the 2011 convention to read: “The League of Women Voters of Utah supports a candidate selection process that allows for the maximum participation of candidates and voters throughout the candidate selection process.” The initiative has been filed

with the state and as soon as the approval comes from the Utah Lt. Governor's office to begin collecting signatures, the process will begin. The Weber League is committed to helping in any way possible. For more information about this initiative, see countmyvoteutah.org.



National Voter Registration Day

The Weber League participated in the Nation Voter Registration Day on September 24, 2013. We registered voters at the Weber County Library and at Harmon's at Five Points. The nation was able to register 8,007 people and we did about 30 in 4 hours. Thanks to Leah for helping set this up and for arranging for the people to participate. It was fun to do this type of registration again, and we were able to get the League's name out to the public as well.

DATES TO REMEMBER

November 18, 2013 at 7:00 p.m. at Pleasant Valley Library – speaker is Azenett Garza

Topic is Ogden United Promise Project

January 13, 2013 at 7:00 p.m. at Weber Main Library

Topic is Consensus on Prison Relocation Study



CONSENSUS QUESTIONS

Funding Utah Public Education

Weber County League of Women Voters

1. Is increasing equity important? Where should the responsibility for student funding reside?

We believe that equity is important in education – where you live should not determine what level of education is provided to students.

We believe the legislature and the state should work toward making all districts as equal as possible, realizing donations in some may increase the amount spent and cause slight inequality. Everyone benefits from an educated society, and everyone should get the best education possible.

We believe the responsibility should lie with the state to fund education, while at the same time holding personal families and businesses accountable by decreasing child deduction exemptions, reducing tax credits offered, increasing income taxes to a level where we can move from the bottom to at least the middle on spending per student, and increasing mineral taxes on businesses that operate in the state.

2. Do you think the difference in spending between Alpine and Park City School Districts is equitable? If not, what changes do you think would make the system more equitable?

We believe that this is not equitable, yet realizing total equality between districts will never be achieved. The same amount of money should be allocated to each student throughout the state, and if other donations come in, slight inequality might occur.

We believe that we need to increase the basic levy so the Weighted Pupil Unit (WPU) allocated to each student from the state is the same. We believe that poorer districts need to be given more funds to try to balance out the inequity involved. Special programs that benefit disadvantaged students need to be funded for districts that do not have the ability to fund them so that students have an opportunity to be equal in achievement level.

We believe that decreasing the income tax exemption per child would hold larger families more responsible for the system they use more than a smaller family. We believe that the amount of credits offered should be decreased, requiring businesses to

pay taxes to provide more to educate their prospective workforce. We also believe that increasing income taxes is necessary in a state with as many students as we have. One suggestion was to increase the amount of taxes charged to businesses that pollute the environment, making it more costly for the state to capture and monitor. The last thought involved eliminating the fee waiver program, which would require implementing a payment plan method for students with less ability to pay. Another suggested source of revenue including taxing mining companies that pollute our air more to spend on education.

3. Should equity be primarily judged on the basis of dollars per pupil or funding for programs which consider demographic data as poverty and lack of English skills?

We believe that students must be evaluated and funded on a needs based determination. Students must have equal opportunity to all necessary resources to help the learning process. Students who cannot speak English must be taught to speak and comprehend it.

We believe it is important that any implementation of programs or processes need to be initially directed toward younger children, as this prepares them for upper level education. Failure to teach younger students necessary skills and require mastery costs taxpayers \$1,000s of dollars.

We believe both state and federal programs need to continue to address the disadvantaged student and try to move them forward.

We believe the programs used should be student driven and focus first on the younger and disadvantaged students. Successful programs stay – unsuccessful ones are removed.

We believe that if funds are limited, we should focus on the younger students first so they can have a strong foundation to move forward. At the same time, following up in higher level grades is essential to success. Math, science, and English literacy, including reading, comprehension, and writing must be emphasized throughout a child's education. Children who cannot read a grade level by middle school often have decreased success throughout life.

4. Is there a more equitable way to fund charter schools?

We believe that there is not – keep it the same – we could not think of any other way to fund these schools that are not involved in property taxes as a basis for funding.

5. How can the Legislators ensure that the funds spent on new programs are spent most efficiently? What is the appropriate follow up? What procedures within the Legislature and the State Office of Education would ensure better accountability?

We believe no program that does not have specific goals and objectives, methodology used to meet the goals, and an evaluation method attached should be funded. The aforementioned should be reviewed prior to a vote being taken. There should also be a program manager that oversees and provides guidance on each program. It is irresponsible to mandate programs that are not specific and outlined providing for accountability.

We believe the Legislators should ensure that these items are in place and viable prior to passage of anything that affects education. We believe programs need to be evidence based and should require reports and results presented in an unbiased, objective format.

We believe that increasing professional development opportunities for teachers increases their effectiveness, which results in better education and developing students to a higher level. Instead of just focusing on the student, we need to focus on funding programs that help the person who facilitates the learning (teachers).

We believe Utah absolutely must increase the WPU. This should be done by increasing taxes on a state level and on property. We need to back off the small amount realized by citizens from lowering taxes and increase them on the premise that it is not acceptable to be so low on WPU.

6. How can citizens ensure those programs serve taxpayer interests that competition is fair and requirements are not slanted toward particular companies?

We believe all programs should have the quality of transparency – providing citizens the data and information gathered from their operation.

We believe we need to continue the open bid process, make sure that proposals are fully advertised, and non-biased toward any specific company.

We believe periodic review of requirements for each bid is analyzed along with the entity chosen to perform the task. This should be conducted by an outside, accredited source.

7. How can the new data be used to improve understanding of education practices? Is there a better way to measure education success than those now used?

We believe strongly that an independent commission needs to interpret the current data. These must be experts outside of the legislature.

We believe that since a great deal of money was spent gathering the current data, we need to interpret and utilize the data to make improvements.

We believe that extreme care should be taken to make sure that people looking at the data are non-biased and knowledgeable.

We believe that testing has become overwhelming and not necessarily beneficial to learning. Alternate testing methods developed by educators can be used to measure knowledge. The standards developed by the state do need to be evaluated, but a written test is not the only method. Perhaps putting together a group of educators to develop these alternate assessments, such as portfolios, books, power points, etc. might be a good suggestion.

We believe creativity is being stifled by testing and preparing for the test – which doesn't always measure ability. Teachers should be allowed to teach the standards in the way they believe will help their students internalize concepts. Educators are professionals and should be held accountable for mastery of basic standards, but they should be given the freedom to determine how these will be taught. Again, alternate methods of assessment need to be generated and implemented.

We believe too much emphasis is being placed on “passing” the test rather than learning the process and material. The grading of schools needs to be eliminated. The public needs to see the assessment results not a grade given by someone who isn't inherently involved in education.

8. What are the most critical funding priorities? Are there ways to ensure funding of critical programs is adequate? Should the League advocate for an increase in funding for education? If so, how?

We believe the most critical funding priorities should be increasing the basic levy and providing money for teacher development. We all benefit from an educated society; therefore, increasing the basic levy for us to remain competitive will show our commitment to that fact. Most of the population doesn't see huge savings from the lowered rate and the education system suffers. We believe this is used as a political tool to make people believe that taxes are cut, while the true victims are the students. Long term societal costs are not considered as today's under-educated students become tomorrow's unprepared, and potentially, unemployable workforce.

We believe that if educators continue with teacher development, they will become more proficient at their trade. If this occurs, students' learning levels will also increase along with the quality of education.

We believe funding regulations for spending should be flexible to allow for differing needs in different districts. Many districts use money to foster family support and this allowance has been regulated. More family involvement will increase the quality and support of the educational system.

We believe that some of the funding must be used to reduce classroom size, especially in the crucial K-3 level. Common sense tells you that decreasing pupil to teacher ratio will increase learning. This needs to be done at the lower levels so students are prepared to function in society.

We believe that emphasis needs to be placed on providing early childhood education programs for low income and non-English speaking students who would not necessarily be able to participate in them. This would help to even the playing field as students enter school.

We believe the statement "Utah education spends \$5 billion dollars annually on 600,000 students" is very misleading. Included in this amount are buildings, salaries, supplies, benefits, purchased outside services, books, etc. While these things help education in some way or another, they are not always directly related to expenditures on classroom education per student. So, while it looks like we spend a little over \$8,000 per student, some of these monies go to basic administration and capital projects. We are 51st in the nation (behind the District of Columbia) in actual spending per pupil regardless of the picture painted by total dollars spent.

We firmly believe that the League needs to lobby for an increase in funding for education in the state of Utah. Failure to increase this will only allow us to continue to stay at the bottom and not be competitive in the United States or in the nation.