



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MASSACHUSETTS

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Testimony in Support of
SB 185: An Act Preventing Students from Dropping out of School
Submitted by the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts to the Joint Committee on Education
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The LWVMA has long stood for equity in education. Today Hispanic students, African-American students, limited-English-proficient students, special-education students, and students from low-income families make up a disproportionate number of the almost 10,000 Massachusetts high-school students who drop out annually prior to graduation. Today the minimum requirement for a decent future is a high school diploma. This has been a persistent equity gap that will not change without effective interventions.

The economic implications of this loss of human potential and the societal burden it creates needs to be addressed now. Without this most basic level of education these young people are less likely to have a job and are more likely to serve time in prison and receive public assistance. They are also the least likely to vote; therefore, their voices are the least likely to be heard. Consequently, it is incumbent upon those of us who have a voice to ensure that all children have the opportunity, within their individual capacities, to live and participate productively in society.

The LWVMA's position that "equality" and "quality" are inseparable means that we must do all we can to address this gap. The LWVMA "supports the principle that special education programs should ensure that students are educated to reach their full individual potential, learning to the best of their abilities the skills they will need to lead productive lives as informed and contributing citizens in their communities." Therefore the LWVMA strongly supports SB 185 and the recommendations of the Massachusetts Graduation Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission particularly in their call to action:

We can no longer tolerate the dropout crisis, nor can we remain passive observers when we have the capacity to change the course of these students' futures. We have the tools to identify students who are at risk of dropping out, and successful prevention, intervention, and dropout recovery strategies to learn from and replicate.

We must demonstrate our commitment to preventing students from dropping out in the future – and welcoming back students who have left school without a diploma – by offering learning environments that promote academic excellence and provide students with the teaching, support, and guidance they require to become engaged lifelong learners and productive and fulfilled citizens.

However, we have three concerns related to the implementation of SB 185. The first is that the data collection required for the Early Warning Indicator Index may be onerous for already overburdened schools. The second is that there will not be sufficient funding of resources to address the needs of the students once they have been identified as potential dropouts. Third, we are particularly concerned that the resources will not be available at the elementary school level since the Graduation Coach Program does not start until middle school.

The LWVMA would like to see implementation firmly tied to state funding. We have seen initiatives that were well intentioned but put further pressure on local school budgets when they lost their funding. Because the mandates were not ended or reduced, we would like to see a funding approach that will consistently support our most vulnerable students. Creative ways to implement the requirements, like matching up two districts to encourage collaboration in sharing of resources, curriculum, staff development, parent training and evaluation processes could be developed. In addition, districts who try these new and creative implementations might be compensated in some way, such as professional education credits to high-performing-district volunteers who help other high-drop-out systems.

The LWVMA urges the Joint Committee on Education to report SB185 out of committee with a favorable vote, secure sufficient funding for SB185, and ensure that schools receive the resources to identify potential dropouts early, assist students before they dropout and provide resources to alternative education for those who leave school before high school graduation.

Thank you for your attention in this matter.