



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MASSACHUSETTS

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*Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing
In Support of H. 3704 An Act Relative to Healthy Youth
By Terry Yoffie, LWVMA Specialist on Education
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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts (LWVMA) has a long history supporting public policy that protects reproductive choice, consumer education on maintaining health, and equal access to education for children. The LWVMA, along with a lengthy list of widely respected health and education organizations,¹ supports sex education in our public schools.

H.3704 offers both good public policy and equal access by ensuring that children across the state will get an age-appropriate education to all health-related issues, including those related to sex education. This bill also upholds existing state law that lets parents opt their children out of sex education programs.

Research shows that providing medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education helps young people stay healthy – enhancing their ability to learn.² In Massachusetts today, such sex education is not universal. In some public school districts, we find excellent health education, while in others there can be little to no teaching on this subject. Up to this day, the laws governing educational standards in the Commonwealth still do not explicitly recognize health education as a core subject. As a result, there is no guarantee that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will continue to maintain academic standards on this subject to help local school districts meet students' educational needs.

In 1993, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the Commonwealth must provide an adequate education for those enrolled in the public schools. It further defined “adequacy” by requiring that students possess specific capabilities, including “sufficient self knowledge and knowledge of his or her mental and physical wellness.” In response to this ruling, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), created a science-based health education framework.

When it comes to personal relationships and sex, these programs teach the benefits of abstinence, while providing vital information on contraception and prevention of pregnancy, disease and violence.³

¹ The American Medical Association, the American Nurses Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Public Health Association, the Institute of Medicine, the Society of Adolescent Medicine, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association.

² Freudenberg N, Ruglis J, *Reframing School Dropout as a Public Health Issue*, *Prev Chronic Dis* 2007;4(4), http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2007/oct/07_0063.htm, accessed March 27, 2009.

Providing information to teens that helps them make informed decisions about their health is especially critical to improving educational achievement, given that teen pregnancy is the leading cause of dropout among young women. These curricula also cover such critical topics as nutrition, mental health, safety, substance abuse, and violence prevention.

The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts urges the members of the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing to give H. 3704 a favorable report and move to make it law in Massachusetts.

Thank you for your consideration.

³ Douglas Kirby, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases 127-136, 2007, http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/EA2007/EA2007_full.pdf