



EDUCATION NEWS

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Education as a Key Issue in the 2010 Midterm Elections?



As the general elections approach, and the primary season is in full swing, it is appropriate to consider to what extent the issue of education enters the public discourse, both in terms of how political candidates speak (or don't) about it and how closely voters tend to it as they cast their votes.

Some candidates may make education their signature issue; some may not consider it. Similarly, voters vary in the extent to which they consider education. Whether or not it is at the forefront of the debates, though, education remains an important issue, particularly for members of minority groups, whose educational attainment remains behind that of their peers.

The Alliance for Excellent Education, a national policy and advocacy organization and partner in the Campaign for High School Equity, recently released the results of a poll it commissioned on voter opinions about education reform. The survey, administered to 1000 likely voters, posed a number of questions about the voters' attitudes toward the public schools and their elected representatives' responses to challenges facing these schools. The poll revealed that:

the majority of respondents view it as extremely or very urgent to improve

elementary schools, middle schools, & high schools, with the largest majority for high school reform;

- fewer than 50% would grade their local high school with an A or B;
- the majority feels that a high drop out rate negatively impacts the economy and America's ability to compete in a global economy;
- the majority feels that their governor and members of Congress are not paying attention to the state of public high schools in America;
- the majority feels that their governor and members of Congress are not very likely or not at all likely to get something done on the issue of public education;
- the majority feel that No Child Left Behind has done a fair or poor job on the public schools in their communities; and
- the vast majority are very or extremely concerned about the fact that thirty percent

of all students and roughly half of African American and Latino students fail to graduate from high school with their peers.

From these results, we can conclude that the majority of likely voters are very concerned about public education and that their elected officials do not give it sufficient attention. Yet, while many candidates running for elected office pay lip service to the issue of education, it seems to rarely be a pivotal issue. Through informal research conducted at LULAC on a sample of approximately 110 candidates running for office in five states, we found that roughly half made, at minimum, general statements regarding education policy, but only about one third provided specific education platforms or provided positions regarding various education issues. In fact, a Gallup poll² conducted in April did not even include education among the issues it mentioned in a poll of approximately 1000 registered voters, asking them "How important will each of the following issues be to your vote for Congress this year?" The economy, healthcare, and unemployment were the top three issues, of those listed.

Nonetheless, education reform, including reauthorization of ESEA, currently known as "No Child Left Behind," is not a non-issue everywhere. In several races across the country, the candidates' positions on education may be the decisive factor in the election. A few examples of how education is playing out in the campaigns are in Minnesota and Ohio, for the office of governor, and Washington, D.C. for mayor.

Where Education is a Hot Topic:

The primary for governor of Minnesota took place on August 10th. The general election in November has no incumbent running and neither of the major parties is seen as having a sure victory. There are at least

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2010 Midterm Elections

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a dozen candidates who will be competing in the primaries, including Matt Entenza of the Democratic/Farmer/Labor party, who has said, "We think education is going to decide the election."³ Perhaps for that reason the candidate has made such bold proposals on his education platform, specifically that he would withdraw Minnesota from participation in *No Child Left Behind* and require all high students to apply for college before they can earn a diploma. His party's endorsed candidate, Margaret Anderson-Kelliher, wishes to reform *No Child Left Behind*. The other main democratic candidate, who edged out Anderson-Kelliher on August 10th, is Mark Dayton. It is interesting to note that while Dayton did not make education the primary issue of his campaign, he voted against the *No Child Left Behind* legislation as a senator. The outcome of this election will potentially shape the issues and prominence of education in the general election.

The gubernatorial race in **Ohio** is widely seen as a toss-up at this point. Incumbent Ted Strickland positions education rather prominently in his bid for re-election, outlining a detailed platform on his campaign website. Strickland's opponent (the primary was held in May) is John Kasich. Kasich's campaign website⁴ makes one mention of his support for education, which is worded as follows under the heading of what I stand for: "*transform our education system – Help our kids achieve, compete and succeed to meet the workforce demands of tomorrow's economy.*"

While not a national race, the **D.C.** race for mayor, in which incumbent Adrian Fenty faces a primary challenge from City Council member Vincent Gray, exemplifies how education can become *the* issue in a campaign. The D.C. school system has garnered national attention since Mayor Fenty hired Michelle Rhee to be its chancellor; Rhee is a divisive figure who has ushered in many changes into the system in controversial fashion. Rhee's tenure is seen as closely tied to Fenty's success. She has not committed to staying on as Chancellor should her boss lose, nor has Fenty's main opponent, Gray, committed to asking her to stay on. Unofficial and informal polls suggest many of Fenty's supporters are backing him due to their support of Chancellor Rhee. Mayor Fenty's campaign site does not list an education platform, but rather lists the changes and successes that have occurred under his tenure as mayor. Candidate

Gray's campaign website includes a lengthy plan that describes what he would do as mayor to continue with current reforms and modify other approaches.⁵

What does this mean for Latino's and students of color?

According to a December 2007 report from the Pew Hispanic Center, entitled, "Hispanics and the 2008 Election: A Swing Vote?"⁶ a survey of Latino registered voters revealed that the campaign issue most often selected as extremely or very important to them was education. Education was most often ranked important among five other issues, including health care, the economy and jobs, crime, immigration, and the war in Iraq. While the relative importance of those issues might be ranked differently if the same respondents were surveyed today regarding the upcoming midterm elections, it is worth noting that education was a critical issue for Latino voters heading into the 2008 elections and that it is likely they will be considering candidates' platforms on education as they go vote this fall. Despite this, candidates run the spectrum from making no statements regarding their positions on education to providing detailed proposals on a variety of educational issues. Even those campaigning with in-depth education platforms, though, rarely address the particular needs of Latino and other students of color with regards to educational outcomes.

Of the campaigns mentioned earlier in the article, only one of the candidates has a campaign website with an education platform that explicitly addresses students of color, with respect to their unique challenges in our education system. They do, however, collectively mention policies that would benefit all students, including students of color. Candidate Entenza (MN) campaigned on wanting to ensure high quality ESL classes; while not specific to Latino, this detail touches on the specific needs within communities of color. He also mentioned the persistent achievement gap between white students and students of color, for which he suggests one way to address is through "representation of diversity among school teachers and staff."⁷ Research bears out the positive effects for students of color of having school-level role models who represent diverse backgrounds. Similarly, Margaret Anderson-Kelliher (MN) noted having supported legislation that included a \$120,000 appropriation for two state colleges to increase the diversity in two local school districts. Candidate Dayton (MN)

wanted to fully fund full-day kindergarten, which, while not explicitly tied to students of color, provides benefits to disadvantaged students.

In the Ohio gubernatorial race, neither candidate explicitly mentions a plan for improvement for students of color, although Governor Strickland does tout his "Closing the Achievement Gap" program, aimed at increasing the promotion rate for "at-risk" students.⁸ And, lastly, the D.C. mayoral race is somewhat unique regarding the extent to which its candidates focus on students of color, simply because it is a local race and the vast majority of the D.C. public schools are students of color; thus, the extent to which the candidates advocate for various education policies, they are advocating policies that by default will affect students of color.

Interestingly, the Minnesota gubernatorial democratic primary was not won by the "education candidate." Yet, among a myriad of campaign issues this election season, education should play a fairly significant role. As states face budget deficits, one of the areas likely to see losses is education. It is important to understand where your candidates stand regarding educational opportunities and how they intend to advocate for those policies. ■

Endnotes

1 Data from the poll conducted by Lake Research Partners and Bellwether Research and Consulting; accessed 7/30/10 at www.all4ed.org/publication_material/July2010Poll

2 Source: www.gallup.com/poll/127247/voters-rate-economy-top-issue-2010.aspx

3 source: www.winonadailynews.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/article_5615959c-9613-11df-8580-001cc4c002e0.html

4 Accessed 7/28/10 at www.kasichforohio.com

5 Fenty and Gray campaign sites: <http://www.fentyreelect.com/accomplishments.php> & www.vincegrayformayor.com/education/plan/

In fact, a CNN/Opinion Research Poll conducted in July 2010 revealed that ten percent of Hispanic respondents regarded education as the most important issue facing the country today. While that percentage was fourth, behind the number of respondents who ranked the economy, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and illegal immigration, as the most important issues, after the economy, there were only marginal differences in the ranks of the importance of the wars, illegal immigration, and education (13%, 11%, and 10%, respectively). Thus, education remains a priority for Hispanics. [[large sampling error]] - <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/07/30/cnnoinion-research-poll-july-16-21-hispanics-and-politics/?fbid=305aqj046qp>

6 Taylor, Paul & Richard Fry. "Hispanics and the 2008 Election: A Swing Vote?" The Pew Hispanic Center. December 6, 2007.

7 Entenza's campaign site: <http://entenza.com/issues/Education/nclb>

8 Strickland's campaign site: http://www.tedstrickland.com/content/pages/issues_primary_education/



Back to *Less* School

A look at education budget problems in the states

Greeted unanimously with neither joy nor dread, depending on one's perspective, late August and early September annually guarantees at least two things: mixed emotions and the proliferation of commercials from office supply stores. Back-to-school time may mean new sneakers and a new start for some, but this year it will mean something borrowed and something blue for many. It will mean students borrowing textbooks from classmates and it will likely mean the blues for students and teachers who are stuffed more tightly into classrooms.

As the most recent school year came to a close, states passed budgets that eliminated millions of dollars and hundreds of programs from the public schools. An analysis conducted by the Center on Budget & Policy Priorities revealed that thirty-three states and the District of Columbia made cuts to their budgets for K–12 education¹; this excludes the additional cuts made to higher education budgets. The severity of these cuts varies from state to state, but any cut is potentially detrimental, particularly to poor students and students of color.² Furthermore, the greater number of poor students attending public schools, due to the effects of the recession in this country, means there are more students

with particular needs who have to be educated with less. Thus, the budget cuts result in compounding and multiplying the effects of poverty and the challenges facing high-poverty schools. What follows is a sample of areas within K–12 education adversely affected by budget cuts in various states:

- Preschool programs and full-day kindergarten programs. In Arizona and Rhode Island, budgets for these early childhood education programs have been slashed.
- Extra support for disadvantaged students in the early grades. Many states, including California have seen these budgets dwindle.
- Funding for classroom supplies, including books and computers. Arizona has eliminated these funds.
- Adult literacy instruction. California reduced its budget in this area.
- Overall public school spending. General budgets covering a variety of programs and positions have been great reduced in Colorado, Michigan, and Mississippi.
- Length of the school year and school day. Hawaii cut 17 days from the school year during 2009–2010.
- Student transportation. Missouri and Illinois both cut transportation budgets — the former by 46%.

- Professional development for teachers and administrators. In Maryland and Washington, teachers will see reductions in professional development due to cuts.
- Gifted & Talented programs. Special programs such as these have been cut in Maryland.
- Early intervention services. Funding for intervention for students with special needs was cut by 16% in Massachusetts.
- Afterschool programs. Supplemental educational services provided in after school hours have potential to reduce gaps between white students and students of color; these programs have been diminished in New Jersey due to budget cuts.
- School support staff, including social workers and nurses. Thousands of support staff positions in schools in North Carolina and Virginia have been cut.
- Class size limits. Cuts in various states have led to districts' exemption from laws capping class size. These states include Georgia, Virginia, and Washington.

Despite the dearth of funds for education at the state level, their budgets are meant to be supplemented by federal appropriations. Federal funding of education, however, remains a very small part of total federal spending—about 3%—and has remained relatively flat for the past five years.³ Furthermore, the portion of the budget dedicated to funding grades 7 through 12 is markedly smaller than the sum allotted to the primary grades (K–6) and postsecondary years (post 12th grade): the Department of Education dedicated approximately seven billion to grades 7–12 in its proposed 2010 budget, while the appropriation to the primary grades and postsecondary years was close to 50 billion.⁴ This disproportionate funding impacts students during some of the most crucial academic years and, as noted above, the pain of budget reductions is felt most strongly by the already fiscally disadvantaged.

The federal government has its role to play regarding education funding, as noted above. It is likely that the most prominent symbol of that is *No Child Left Behind*, whereby the federal government applies a carrot-and-stick policy. One of the on-going complaints about *No Child Left Behind* is that it is an unfunded mandate—that is, it is very prescriptive but does not come with adequate funds for states to uphold its law. Consequently, some states argue that they end up paying more money to be in compliance with the law than they receive in monetary support from the government for following the law. As a result of this tension,

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¡Adelante America! at LULAC

By: **Jhovanna Lopez**
Adelante America Fellow



In 2009, LULAC and LNEsc in partnership with AT&T have been conducting the Adelante America Program and continue to serve students throughout the country. Since LULAC launched this program, it has been able to serve many students across the country by creating an educating environment through academic programs and educational events that motivate students to graduate from high school. The Adelante America Program also provides participating students with positive leadership programs, such as an alternative path to gangs and violence program. The services that LULAC and LNEsc provide are educational workshops, counseling session, and cross-cultural field trips. There are various sites throughout the country, where the Adelante America coordinators help students build confidence in the work that they do and become self-motivated serve as leaders in their community.

LULAC and LNEsc currently serve students in the following sites: East Los Angeles, CA; Pueblo, CO; Chicago, IL; Philadelphia, PA; and El Paso and San Antonio, Texas; and at the following LULAC councils in: Antioch, CA; San Benito County, CA; and Tucson, AZ; as well as with our community partners in Wallingford, CT; Orlando, FL; South Bend, IN; Holland, MI; and Toledo, OH.

Program coordinators and staff implement the Adelante America Program accordingly to meet the needs of each student. Students participate in a variety of community service projects, leadership conferences, and field trips to enhance their knowledge and learn various leadership skills. Adelante America realizes the importance of parent involvement in student academic career and incorporates parents in events to discuss the importance of their child's or children's education. In Toledo, Ohio program coordinators held a Parent's Night Summit, where parents discussed the importance of higher education. In addition, program participants had the opportunity to meet adult leaders in their communities from whom they felt motivated and inspired.

Throughout the program, students learn and develop new skills; in Tucson, Arizona students coordinated a Voter Registration Drive and learned about the process and the importance of registering new voters. Students realize challenges that the Hispanic community faces and apply changes in their community as young advocates. Students in Hollister, California prepared first-aid packages for the Haitian earthquake victims, from which they helped many people with an act of kindness.

The Adelante America Program does not only motivate students to excel academically, but also allows students to discover new interests by serving as leaders in their communities and advocating certain issues that are important to the Hispanic community. ■



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many states have tinkered with ways to opt out of the law—through waivers and other actions. As state budgets become tighter, we can expect to see more and more states and districts looking for exemption. This is even evident in recent and upcoming campaigns (*see other article in this newsletter*).

Earlier in August Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, called members in for a special session, specifically to pass a jobs bill. The bill, to provide an additional mini stimulus to minimize the potential jobs lost this fall, passed and is estimated to have saved about 160,000 education jobs⁵ that were otherwise slated to be lost with state budget cuts. The actual number it will save and the impact of that savings is up for debate; however, whatever the outcome, back-to-school is likely to feel different in 2010. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Nicholas Johnson, Phil Oliff and Erica Williams, "An Update on State Budget Cuts: At Least 46 States Have Imposed Cuts That Hurt Vulnerable Residents and the Economy," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Revised August 4, 2010.
- 2 See, Rogers, J., Fanelli, S., Freelon, R., Medina, D., Bertrand, M., Del Razo, M. (2010). *Educational Opportunities in Hard Times: The Impact of the Economic Crisis on Public Schools and Working Families*. Los Angeles: UCLA IDEA, UC/ACCORD.
- 3 Alliance for Excellent Education. Accessed on 8/10/10 at http://www.all4ed.org/federal_policy/budget_FY2010
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 United States House Committee on Education and Labor. Accessed on 8/10/10 at <http://edlabor.house.gov/blog/2010/08/teachers-jobs-saved-by-hr-1586.shtml>; see <http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/edjobsfund-allocations.pdf>, accessed on 8/17/10.



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