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A LOOK AT THE MOST INTERESTING RACES FOR EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY IN THE 2022 MID-TERM ELECTION

Seven States to Watch on Election Day

BIPARTISAN BREAKTHROUGH: DEMOCRATS GIVE A NOD TO EDUCATION CHOICE

Less than a week away from election day, Democrats in two politically important states have taken positive positions on education choice programs in their states, both existing and proposed, feeling compelled it appears to back education opportunity programs which have become a major national issue for parents.

Last month, **Pennsylvania** gubernatorial nominee Josh Shapiro's [campaign website](#) called for "adding choices for parents and educational opportunity for students and funding lifeline scholarships like those approved in other states and introduced in Pennsylvania," language that was previously absent on his initiatives for education. Shapiro told Pennsylvania press on October 17th and subsequently that his support for education choice and fully funded public education is not an "either or."

"It's what I believe," Shapiro said, according to [The Tribune-Democrat](#). "I'll be a champion of public education, as I have throughout my career, and I'm also going to be a champion for children as I have throughout my career." Both Republican Candidate and sitting State Senator Mastriano (via his voting record on [HB 2169](#)) and Democratic Attorney General Shapiro have voiced their support for lifeline scholarships. Lifeline scholarships would give parents who live in districts in the bottom 15% of state performance metrics the ability to choose an alternative academic setting that meets their child's individual learning needs. The money would follow the student at the parent's discretion. With this shift, Pennsylvania looks to be in a great position to capitalize on education choice policy, whichever way the election goes.

Like Shapiro, last week **Illinois** Gov. J.B. Pritzker felt it necessary to promote his support of education opportunity when he endorsed the state's education choice program in a **new candidate survey**, replying "Yes" to the question, "Do you support Illinois' tax credit scholarship that provides financial support for students to attend private and parochial schools?" The program helps 7,600 low-income students attend a private school of their choice, but 26,000 more were on the waiting list hoping the program would expand. An April 2021 **poll** found 61% of Illinois voters support **Invest in Kids**.

Still, Pritzker needs the support of the unions to win and he's not going too far toward parent power, seeming to confuse spending with funds following kids in general. "My main focus with respect to K-12 education is ensuring that there is sufficient funding for all children to receive a quality education, regardless of their zip code," he said in a more detailed answer. "That's why I've dedicated an additional \$1.3 billion toward public education during my term. With assurance from the advocates for Invest in Kids that they will support increased public school funding, my budgets have ultimately included the relatively small Invest in Kids Scholarship Program."

It's the opposite of what then-candidate Pritzker had in mind for the program when he ran for governor in 2018. "I'm opposed to that \$75 million tax credit, that school voucher system," he said, adding, "We should as soon as possible do away with it. What I oppose is taking money out of the public schools, and that's what happened here."

Pundits have speculated that this change of heart is in response to **a recent study** that found nearly 80,000 students have left Chicago Public Schools and student proficiency rates have declined nearly 80% in math and 70% in reading since the current leaders took over the Chicago Teachers Union in 2010. All that, and 55% higher costs.

State lawmakers return to Springfield on November 15, 2022 for their veto session. Making the Invest in Kids program permanent and expanding it to include preschool and allow business donors to target schools would be a solid accomplishment. So regardless of his fate in this upcoming election, he may be able to sign the changes into law during his current term.

Pritzker's challengers Republican State Sen. Darren Bailey and Libertarian Scott Schluter did not answer the Chicago Sun-Times' questionnaire, but Bailey voiced support for school choice in February.

"We support school choice and options for parents to ensure they can provide their child with the best possible education," **Bailey tweeted**. "One where they're taught to chase their dreams and find success. One where masks are optional and possibilities are endless."

THE BEST CHANCES TO REVERSE BAD EDUCATION CHOICE POLICIES

Three states where the current leadership have been downright hostile to education freedom are getting a lot of attention from pundits. The predictions are that these races may be closer than people or polls are suggesting. Changes in all three could mean huge wins for parent power.

In **Oregon**, Democrats haven't lost a governor's race in four decades. Two years ago, then Democratic Candidate for President Joseph R. Biden **won the state by 16 percentage points**. The only Republican to win statewide election since 2002 did before finishing his term. The current polling has Republican Christine Drahan up 3 percentage points with less than 2 weeks until Election Day. Drahan has a real shot at winning, partly because a Democratic-turned-independent candidate running as a centrist has drawn a sizable bloc of support away from the Democratic nominee, Tina Kotek.

Republican Christine Drahan wants more parental control, unaffiliated Betsy Johnson hopes to reshape the Department of Education while Democrat Tina Kotek says it should do more to help districts. Drahan has positioned herself as an advocate for parents in the governor's race, saying she wants more parental involvement and transparency in curriculum, as well as higher standards for schools.

"We have chronic low-performing schools and parents need to be able to put their students in the best school that meets their needs," **she said**, rather than being limited to their neighborhood school. Drahan supports tax credits or deductions that would make it easier for families to pay for private schooling if that's what they feel best serves their students. But she said that shouldn't mean the state stops supporting public schools or funding them adequately so students enrolled can succeed.

Democrat Tina Kotek (**via her campaign website**) has stated, "I oppose any effort to undermine public schools by providing taxpayer dollars to private schools in the name of "school choice." This is in stark contrast to Christine Drahan, who has **publicly supported** expanded access to education choice, including restoring open enrollment and supporting charter schools and magnet schools.

For **Wisconsin** education, the Nov. 8 election will be pivotal, impacting the shape and course of education policy for years to come. While the election is currently a toss up, the polls have been trending in Republican nominee Tim Michels direction for some weeks now.

The two candidates for governor have significantly **different visions** for what should lie ahead for education. That, in itself, sets the stage for different paths. After all, the outcome of an election for governor often has made a big difference in the past. Pro-education choice Republicans tend to protect and increase the state's pioneering voucher program. And today there appears **little chance** that anti-education choice Democrats will gain majorities in either the state Assembly or Senate. That makes the outcome for governor pivotal, creating a referendum on what Wisconsin wants to see in schooling.

Republican challenger Tim Michels' stance on choice will build upon Wisconsin's four existing choice programs. "The research is clear that **options produce results**. Private school choice students score higher on the college-readiness ACT test and have higher levels of academic proficiency. Milwaukee choice students are more likely to graduate from high school and are less likely to be involved in crime. Most Milwaukee choice and charter students attend schools rated highly by DPI", he said.

“Barriers to these programs must be removed so that all families have the choices that have been only available to some. I support school choice for all Wisconsin families. Financial obstacles must be removed. Under my leadership, Wisconsin families will have access to a school that meets their needs, regardless of their income or zip code.”

In contrast, incumbent Gov. Tony Evers has been a veto force in a state assembly long dominated by choice advocates. In 2019, Gov. Evers froze enrollment in Wisconsin’s parental choice programs and curtailed the expansion of independent public charter schools in his budget proposal. The proposals represented the most brazen attack on school choice in Wisconsin in nearly a decade. In 2022, as expected, Evers vetoed a package of education bills that would have dramatically changed the state’s education system, especially in Milwaukee. One of the plans would have completely eliminated the income caps at private voucher schools. Some form of income limits have been in place for Wisconsin’s voucher school programs ever since their inception.

The third key battleground state where champions of choice have a real shot at flipping their fates is **Nevada**. The poll from the *Nevada Independent*-OH Predictive Insights released Sunday found that the pro-education choice Republican candidate Joe Lombardo is ahead of Governor Steve Sisolak in the gubernatorial race by about 3 points, 42% to 45%. The Nevada race has been near the top in campaign spending for Republicans, who smell blood in the water.

Lombardo, currently Clark County Sheriff, has seen the impact of failing education up close and personal. He **believes** that a student’s zip code shouldn’t determine the quality of their education. “To ensure every child has access to the best education possible, Joe will implement school choice initiatives that empower Nevada families. By expanding access to charter schools, providing more opportunity scholarships, and investing in Education Savings Accounts, Joe believes that we can make our education system work better for every student and every family.”

In a **Twitter post** earlier this year he reiterated, “As Governor, I will empower parents by expanding charter schools, school choice, and opportunity scholarships. YOU know better than politicians when it comes to your children and their schooling - policies here in Nevada should ALWAYS reflect that.”

In response, Democratic Gov. Steve Sisolak has accused Lombardo’s “school choice” plan of threatening to siphon up to \$300 million dollars of state money allocated to public schools, Sisolak said that the state “cannot afford to have school choice right now.” **Arguing that** private schools do not need to accept students who might be more expensive to teach, including English-language learners or students with learning disabilities, Sisolak also said he would “stand behind the teachers in the state of Nevada.”

Lombardo pushed back against the governor, saying, “We should not be regulated because of the ZIP codes we live in.” As for effects the program might have on the public education system, Lombardo said it is “absolutely false” that the use of vouchers implies a lack of faith in public schools.

TWO STATES WHERE EXISTING CHOICE PROGRAMS COULD SUFFER

Teachers unions are girding their proverbial loins in two states where a new party in power would mean they, not parents, would have the power to drive education policy. In **Arizona**, Kari Lake **prevailed** in the primary over a field that included Karrin Taylor Robson – an ally of Gov. Doug Ducey, a Republican who defied former President Donald J. Trump by defending the results of Arizona’s 2020 election – and two other candidates. Lake faces Katie Hobbs, Arizona’s Democratic secretary of state, in the general election. Mr. Ducey is prohibited by term limits from seeking re-election. Arizona is currently a toss up race according to most polling 20 days out.

A lot is at stake for Arizonian families if they look to preserve the most robust school choice program in the country. Arizona has an **Empowerment Scholarship Accounts** program that was adapted in 2022 to expand eligibility to all Arizona students. Participating families can receive scholarships of about \$7,000 for qualifying educational expenses, including private school tuition, online education, tutoring, transportation, and education therapy.

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Katie Hobbs says she **has opposed school vouchers** in Arizona for over a decade because she was concerned about how the program would evolve. Hobbs voted **against a bill in 2011** that established the Arizona Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program, which was created to expand educational options outside of public school for students with disabilities.

Hobb **opposes** even public charter school freedoms and would seek to **roll back** the expansion of the Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program. **Lake** believes that “school choice improves outcomes for children of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds. That’s why we’re going to fund students, not systems. As parents, you decide where you want your kid to go to school, send them there, and their state funding will follow them. No waitlists, no applications, no hurdles or hoops to jump through, period. This is 100% school choice, without barriers – you decide what’s best for your kid, and you direct your tax dollars towards the educational opportunities that fit your family’s needs.”

She wants “100% backpack funding” for students, which would build on the recently passed expansion of the voucher-style Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program with “fractionalized” funding that would allow students to attend public schools while using the program for courses at other institutions.

Finally, in **Georgia**, polls suggest that just 3% of registered voters in Georgia name “education” as their top issue in statewide races. “Republicans, what they want to talk about is inflation and the economy,” **said Charles Bullock**, a political science professor at the University of Georgia. “Democrats want to talk about failure to expand Medicaid, the abortion decision.” These are the key issues in a 2018 rematch between Democratic challenger Stacey Abrams and Republican Gov. Brian Kemp.

Still, the state's charter and choice programs are a target for Gubernatorial challenger Stacy Abrams who is backed by the teachers' unions. In a 2018 [interview](#) with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Abrams stated, "We must also roll back measures like voucher programs that only funnel dollars from public schools to private interests. I am proud to be the only candidate in the race for governor who opposes voucher-like programs that take money away from our public schools to hand over to private schools; I am the only candidate with a proven track record of defending our public schools."

Georgia is spending more than \$25 billion on public schools this year, out of a \$58 billion budget, one indication of how education dominates state government. Georgia's 120,000 public school teachers have historically been a key voting bloc. For example, a 2002 revolt by teachers helped deny Democrat Roy Barnes a second term after the governor tied teacher evaluations and bonuses to student performance and eliminated tenure.

In May 2021, Brian Kemp [signed three school choice expansion bills](#) in Georgia. "COVID-19 has certainly highlighted the challenges that families face and finding the right education for their child, especially those with special needs," Kemp said during a bill signing ceremony at the state Capitol. "This bill will give more parents greater options to ensure their child has every opportunity to achieve their dreams."

Notably, the real school choice champion in Georgia's election is neither of the gubernatorial candidates, but former state representative Alisha Thomas Searcy, the Democratic nominee for Georgia school superintendent. Searcy was elected to the state House at just 23 and consistently [advocated for school choice](#) legislation during her 12 years in office. She co-authored a law that allows students to transfer to other schools within their district, voted in favor of the state's tax credit scholarship program and championed a constitutional amendment creating the State Charter Schools Commission. "It's opening up opportunities within public education for literally hundreds of thousands of children," Searcy said, noting that her views are likely to earn her some Republican votes. "I have a track record of working across the aisle and having bipartisan relationships." Despite being both a Democrat and a woman of color who enjoys deep and strong support from many different voters, Abrams has said nothing about Searcy's candidacy.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

With the midterm elections a week away, it's important to understand where the candidates stand on education opportunity. The issue of education choice and opportunity has emboldened parents, as [COVID-related school closures](#) revealed deficiencies that existed before the pandemic, motivating parents on both sides of the aisle to dig deeper and demand a bigger say in how and where their children are educated. Many understand that the dismal results of the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress on 4th and 8th grade Reading and Mathematics achievement are a direct reflection of poor adaptability in the education space and a system that has long been impervious to change. These factors contribute to tightening gubernatorial races, inspired parents, and students who are desperate for the so-called "adults in the room" to take control of a brighter future.

Republicans have grabbed the initiative by directly addressing parents — both in campaign materials and policy prescriptions — casting themselves as the defenders of families’ interests. Republican governors like Ron DeSantis in Florida and Glenn Youngkin in Virginia have helped make **parents’ rights** into a **major political talking point**, and Republican-aligned groups like No Left Turn In Education and Parents Defending Education have continuously **pushed these issues into the spotlight**. Democrat governors defend a nostalgic vision of public education that often sounds tone deaf even to their base. While partisan swords are out, parents simply want people who are going to give them the power to direct the education of their own families.

This represents a rare point of intersection between national and local politics, as well as a deep fissure in the competitive races that CER has outlined and that is more fully documented in the Parent Power Index. An expected outcome from parental mobilization has been the focus of attention further down the ballot. After countless election cycles flying under the radar, **school board elections** are suddenly attracting more attention and resources than at any time in recent political memory. There’s more **attention** on school board races this year in the wake of statewide post-pandemic drops in student test scores in math and reading, a grim teacher shortage and lingering bitterness over school closures and masking during COVID-19.

Advocacy or parent groups have expanded or materialized to promote candidates and push more people to get involved in school governance. In **Nevada** and **Wisconsin**, vulnerable Democratic governors stand accused of presiding over ideological indoctrination in classrooms and inept recovery from pandemic learning loss. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, **recently rolled out** a campaign agenda that includes a “Parents Bill of Rights.” Even campaigns for state superintendent, a position so obscure and technocratic that most voters would normally be unaware, are garnering **attention** in this years’ election cycle.

Parents need to take a closer look at what voting means for educational freedom in their respective states, exploring the links in this report, and also the **Parent Power Index**, which is poised to announce a reshuffling of states that are making empowering parents a priority. Even for people without school-aged children, the 2022 election cycle will have a dramatic impact for all voters given the trajectory of education in the states referenced not only above but everywhere. The future of education, rightly called the **most important national security issue** of our time, requires knowing not only how the candidates are shaping education, but what you can do to impact their fate and bring more of them together, regardless of party, to mitigate further educational decline and send all on a path to a bright future.

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