

Memorandum

TO: Interested Parties
FR: Katrina Mendiola, NEA Political Director
RE: Public Education and the 2022 Elections
DT: March 30, 2022

Over the last several years, public education has become an increasingly high-profile political issue, driven by debate around pandemic-related school policies and rightwing attacks on how American history is taught, what books can be assigned in class or included in the library, whether racism and gender can be studied or discussed in a forthright manner, and whether teachers should face severe professional penalties, lawsuits, or even arrest for presenting material that some deem “divisive.”

Dangerous bills that restrict teaching the truth and the freedom to learn, and that undermine the full inclusion of LGBTQ youth in school communities, pose threats in several states. Along with these attacks, there is also a clear push underway to privatize and defund public education with vouchers and charters; just when public education needs strong support, as students, teachers, and schools continue to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this environment, we set out to help our political allies respond to rightwing campaign rhetoric and communicate a positive vision for the future of public education that is compelling to voters, and particularly parent-voters. In this memo, you will find our view on the core lessons found in the research, practical guidance for reaching out to educators and parents, and incorporating parent- and educator-activists into your campaign, and message guidance informed by this new data.

Let’s be clear: fighting to a draw on public education is not good enough.

This is an issue that NEA-recommended candidates and allies need to win on. If our opponents break even here, or dissuade supported candidates from emphasizing education, we are giving up an advantage that we need. In October 2021, a [Washington Post-ABC poll](#) found Democrats with only a 3 point edge over Republicans on the question of which party is trusted to do a better job on schools. According to historic data in that survey, as well as surveys by [NBC News](#), the Democratic Party has typically maintained a significant advantage on handling education, with margins reaching 20 to 25 points in some years where data is available. **Ducking the issue or failing to communicate a strong, positive message on the education is a mistake.**

In this research project, we sought to look beyond prevalent media narratives, particularly those that emerged after the high-profile races of 2021, and get a clear look at how parents and voters see the issues facing public education and what they care about most for the future of their own children’s schools. The attached research report, and the recommendations that follow, are based on a series of five parent focus groups and a survey of 2,000 likely voters in battleground states. The qualitative and quantitative research was conducted by Lake Research Partners, in conjunction with The Majority Institute.

Core Lessons

We have identified two core lessons in this research that are essential for campaign 2022 and the future of the politics of public education.

First, everyone involved – students, educators, and parents – is stressed and exhausted. However, despite what anti-public education politicians and some in the media might have you believe, most parents recognize that teachers are on the same side as them. We have a real opportunity to make common cause, politically, between parents and teachers – and students – to demand a strong future for public education. In recent years, united communities have won major gains for schools, educators, and students during strikes in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and the Arizona walkout, to name a few examples. **When educators, parents, and students come together, we can win major progress for public education.** That same coalition can help candidates make their case to voters.

Second, allies of public education need to be clear and firm about what they stand for. The extreme attacks on public education and educators are not broadly popular with the voters. **Parents do not want schools to become a battleground for rightwing culture war attacks.** However, if Democrats, progressives, and other allies shy away from the issue and cede this territory, we will not win this issue by default. Voters are focused on education, and if we don't offer our own answers to the challenges facing our schools, voters are more likely to respond to rightwing rhetoric or become cynical.

Parents want to fix the teacher shortage by hiring and retaining talented and passionate teachers. They want their children's schools to have the resources that they need. Parents want their children to learn America's full history. The majority of parents don't want politicians banning books or removing the truth about slavery, the Holocaust, or the civil rights movement from the curriculum. On these issues, it is important to be specific about the harm that our opponents are trying to do – the opportunities and resources that they are taking away from students – and specific about what we stand for.

Key Findings

- 79% of battleground state voters say the teacher shortage is a problem, and 57% say it's a big problem. Only 16% think it isn't.
- 75% of voters say politicians who try to ban books that they disagree with from the school library are a problem, 56% say they are a big problem. Only 18% think they aren't a problem.
- 73% of voters say that politicians passing laws that prevent teachers from covering our full history, including slavery, the Civil rights Movement, and racism, are a problem.

Strategic Recommendations

Public education is a winning issue for candidates and a compelling communication and advocacy issue for allied committees and organizations. To successfully drive a strategy around public education, we suggest the following tactics.

- ✓ **Present a Clearly Defined Positive Vision for the Future of Public Education.** Make a plan to address the challenges and needs of the schools in your state, including providing the resources schools need to improve educator pay and retention, make sure students can get the attention they need to succeed academically, and make mental health services available to support students through a difficult time. The talking points below can serve as a guide to effectively making the case.
- ✓ **Draw Clear Contrasts.** For example, communicate the positive impact of the American Rescue Plan and, where applicable, state budget progress, on local schools and contrast that with the obstruction and damage that your opponent has caused or tried to cause. Think critical infrastructure and health

improvements, staff, and school lunch. Speak about the real challenges facing schools, including underfunding and staff shortages, and point out how the threat of lawsuits and restrictions on the freedom to teach and learn are making those worse.

- ✓ **Listen to Educators and Parents.** Bring educators in as partners in all aspects of your campaign. Find out from local educators what schools need in order for students to thrive. Find out what needs to be done to keep experienced teachers from leaving the profession. Also organize and listen to parents. Identify shared priorities for the future of schools that local parents and educators have in common.

- ✓ **Create an “Educators For” Volunteer-Activist Group.** There is strength in recruiting and naming a core group of educators and school staff who volunteer for the campaign. Identify volunteer chairs, get t-shirts made, create a Facebook group, and organize specific volunteer opportunities like “Educators For” canvass days, phonebanking shifts, and text parties.

- ✓ **Empower and Amplify Educators – Along With Parents and Students – as Surrogates.** Build public events focused on education, such as school visits, roundtables, tele-town halls, and Zoom events. Educators have trusted voices within their communities. Smart campaigns will find ways to raise those voices and encourage educators to lead.

Message Recommendations Based on the Research

Main Message on Education Issues:

Do: Highlight how important education issues are to parents and voters. Voters want candidates to talk about how they will strengthen their neighborhood public schools by ensuring they have the resources needed so all students can thrive – using real-world examples, along with educators and parents as validators to make the case.

Do: Remind people that parents and educators are united. While some politicians try to drive a wedge between parents and educators, they are united in their desire to see every student succeed. In every community across the nation, parents and educators are working together to build stronger public schools and create opportunities for students.

Do: Public school champions need to aggressively communicate their vision on education. Anti-public school politicians have made it clear that they are going to attack public schools and teachers in the 2022 campaign. That is why champions of public schools need to lay out their values and vision for education – making the issue central to their campaigns.

- Parents and teachers want the same thing – strong public schools that give kids every possible opportunity to succeed.
- During the pandemic, too many kids across our country have fallen behind in academic, social, and emotional learning. We need to pull together now to support students and schools, and make sure that [American Rescue Plan/state budget resources are used so that] our schools have the resources and staff so that students can have safe and healthy environments and the individualized attention that they need.
- This year, during these tough times, we need to [re-]elect leaders focused on solving the real problems our students are facing.
- [Candidate name] has focused on getting all students the support they need to thrive. [He/She/They] have partnered with parents and educators to expand learning opportunities for students. [Candidate name] is working to help solve the teacher shortage with full-time, passionate teachers, finding funding for mental health support for children, and making sure there are enough talented and dedicated staff in school so that students have the support that they need to learn and thrive.
- Unlike some politicians who are pushing their extreme political agenda into our public schools by banning books about Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington or the Civil Rights Movement, [Candidate name] will make sure that students have the opportunity to learn our full history. [He/she] has listened to the parents and educators in [community] and is addressing the real issues we face.

Response to Attacks:

Do: Directly respond before pivoting. The opinion research on these issues show that the rightwing attacks on public schools are only effective in a vacuum and most people disagree with these extreme attacks, especially after they've heard a different, positive vision for education. Parents and voters want students to learn the good and bad of history, about race and racism, and have age-appropriate discussions in the classroom on controversial issues past and present. That is why it is important to directly respond to the attack, before pivoting to the real, top-priority, issues facing our students and the solutions that parents and voters are looking for.

Avoid: Using vague language. Instead, directly name the classic and award-winning books that should not be banned, and be clear about the age-appropriate learning opportunities students should have. Don't try to debate what CRT is or is not or whether it is or is not taught in K-12 schools. After a year of attacks on the issue, there is a lot of confusion about CRT and for some it is a highly politicized buzz-phrase. Instead of debating the term, say what you are for and against without jargon.

- Our children should learn age-appropriate lessons about America, from our greatest triumphs to our darkest moments. That includes slavery and how racism affects us today.
- Parents and educators agree that all our students need to learn the good and the bad about our history so we can learn from the past and come together. Students miss out when we allow politicians like [opponent's name] to whitewash our history.
- Instead of addressing the real issues our students and schools are facing, [opponent name/"some politicians"] is pushing their extreme political agenda into our public schools, even trying to ban books that deal with Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington and the Civil Rights Movement.
- [Opponent name/"some politicians"] wants to punish teachers, allowing them to be sued or fined, just for doing their job.
- But because they have listened to parents and educators, [candidate name] understands the real issues that are facing our students. [He/She/They] knows that our public schools work best when parents and teachers collaborate on what children need.
- That is why [Candidate name] has focused on getting all students the support they need to thrive. [He/She/They] has partnered with parents and educators to expand learning opportunities for students. [Candidate name] is working to help solve the teacher shortage with full-time, passionate teachers, finding funding for mental health support for children, to make sure that every student can have they individualized attention that they need to learn and thrive in school.

Coming Soon

- Research on Educator Pay and the Teacher Shortage: April 27

NEA will be sharing new research on the educator pay gap and the ongoing teacher shortage that is challenging communities across the country. This is a critical challenge that will require local, state, and federal solutions. Solving the staffing crisis is a top-of-mind issue for educators and parents alike – and critical for student success.

- Teacher Appreciation Week: May 2

This entire week is a great time to celebrate educators and amplify the voices of current, aspiring, and retired teachers. It's also a perfect opportunity to communicate recent achievements – such as the impact of the American Rescue Plan – on behalf of public education, or introduce new ideas and campaign pledges about how you will support public schools, educators, and students in your next term.