

What Americans Want from Democrats on Education



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Takeaways

- Polling shows that the Democratic edge on education has dwindled, likely because Democrats are seen as the party who is "pouring money into a broken system" and "blaming poverty for problems with public education."
- Democrats need to show they are willing to break with the status quo, and an agenda to modernize the teaching profession is the best way to do it.
- Americans across the political spectrum broadly support a modernizing teaching agenda, and it bests both other reform proposals and traditional union arguments by a wide margin.

In December 2012, a Pew Research poll gave Democrats a 26-point edge in which party they'd trust on education. In September 2013, an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll put the edge at 18 points. An October 2014 Pew Research poll found that the Democratic edge had dwindled to 5.¹ And in a November 2014 survey by Global Strategy Group for Third Way, we found a similar result, with Democrats boasting a scant 8-point lead over Republicans on which party can best handle education.

Democratic policymakers and candidates have long taken it as an article of faith that they belong to the "education party." In the last election, as in every one before it, countless ads attacked Republicans as wanting to gut investments in education and cast the Democratic candidate as the savior of

public schools. Judging by the most recent polling, that self-perception may no longer reflect what most Americans think.

This memo offers our insights as to why Democrats are slipping on education and lays out a path forward that would improve schools and appeal to swing voters without alienating the base. The analysis is based on our recent nationwide poll of 808 voters plus an oversample of 201 public school teachers conducted by Global Strategy Group for Third Way from November 11th to 16th, 2014.² (It should be noted that the teacher sample skewed much older than the demographics of teachers in the classrooms, which may affect the attitudinal data—more than half were over 50 and none were under 30.)

Why Democrats Need a New Narrative on Education

According to our Global Strategy Group poll, only a third of the country (34%) says they trust Democrats in Congress to handle K through 12 education issues—a slim 8 points and almost within the margin of error compared to the number who say the same about Republicans (26%). Shockingly, a full 39% volunteer that they don't trust either party on the issue, despite such an answer not even being offered as an option. That means with two-thirds of the country, Democrats can no longer assume they are the party of education.

Why are voters rejecting such a long-held assumption? A big hint lies in the top two phrases Americans use to describe Democrats on education: “pouring money into a broken system” and “blaming poverty for problems with public education.” Even amongst teachers, those sentiments prevail, with 40% and 45% using those phrases to describe Democrats, respectively. In addition:

- By 17 points, Democrats are seen as “defending the current system” over their Republican counterparts.

- By 8 points, Democrats are described as “captured by education special interests,” and voters are equally likely to think a typical Democratic politician would “support the teachers union” versus “support[ing] the changes that would make our schools better” if they could only choose one.
- While 82% of the country says improving public schools is a top or major priority for themselves, voters think both parties are equally “complacent about the state of schools.”

Republicans have problems as well. They are seen first and foremost as “blaming teachers for every problem,” and they were viewed as more likely to “oppos[e] changes that could improve student performance” than Democrats by 11 points and as less “serious about improving K through 12 education” by 9 points. But it’s clear that most Americans view Democrats as the defenders of the status quo. And when it comes to the single most important in-school factor in a child’s education—teachers—they aren't at all satisfied with the existing state of affairs.

Our respondents had a generally favorable view of teachers but questioned how accountable they were for their performance. When asked to describe public school teachers with one word, “dedicated,” “underpaid” and “overworked” were the three most common words they volunteered. However, nearly 6 in 10 say a teacher who does a bad job is not likely to get fired, while half think that excellence won't get a teacher promoted or rewarded. Only 14% would recommend a young person go into the teaching profession, and 74% think teachers have too little control over the operation of schools (though the plurality say teachers' unions have too much control). Even teachers wouldn't advise a student to become a teacher, with only 13% saying they would recommend that pathway. And 77% of voters, along with 82% of teachers, say if we don't change the perception of the teaching profession, schools will not be able to recruit high-achieving young people into the classroom. If

this is the status quo Democrats are seen as defending, they're in trouble.

Reclaiming Education by Modernizing Teaching

For Democratic policymakers to reclaim the undisputed title as the champions of excellent education in this country, they must act to counter these negative perceptions and indicate their willingness to break with the past to improve the performance of schools. The default answer that we must simply invest more in our educational system isn't sufficient—in fact, it may reinforce the notion that Democrats are only interested in pouring more money into a system that isn't working for those who need it most. Instead, in addition to promoting investments in education, Democrats must confront the hurdles they face with voters head on and champion reforms that clearly show they aren't afraid of change and are driven by kids' interests, not special interests.

To that end, we tested several reform ideas—many of which we have supported or proposed in the past. The most promising by far was this: modernizing the teaching profession to make it more attractive to the next generation of high-achieving young people. That narrative, and the policies which would accomplish it, garner more support than the other policies listed on today's menu of oft-cited education reforms—and would be the single most effective step the country could take to improve K-12 education for all kids. And it is seen—and rightly so—as both valuing teachers and breaking from the status quo.

A modernizing teaching agenda has wide support across the political spectrum, besting both hardline “reformer” positions and traditional union arguments by a wide margin.

- A whopping 92% of Americans support “creating more opportunities for K through 12 public school teachers to earn promotions and raises,” with 65% strongly supporting that policy.

- 94% (86% among teachers) think we should improve schools by “ensuring that teachers in every state pass a rigorous test of content knowledge and teaching skills before entering the classroom,” with 74% (62% among teachers) *strongly* supporting this proposal.
- 9 in 10 Americans, along with two-thirds of teachers, believe that hiring and firing decisions should be made “based on a teacher’s performance in the classroom, not seniority,” though the number of voters who *strongly* support that idea (66%) is more than twice the number of teachers (30%) who do.
- By 42 points among all voters and 28 points among teachers, Americans want teacher training colleges to be held accountable for the performance of their graduates.
- Voters agree by 40 points that “the best way to attract young people into the profession would be to treat teachers like professionals in other fields by providing opportunities for the best teachers to earn greater responsibility and higher pay” as opposed to simply “rais[ing] all teacher salaries.” Teachers favor the first policy statement by 20 points.
- By nearly 50 points, voters support providing monthly student loan forgiveness to teachers as long as they stay in the classroom, and by nearly 70 points, they support allowing a teacher licensed in another state to more easily move and teach in their state.

By contrast, other proposals to fix schools are harder sells with some groups of voters in the Democratic base—though it may be because most Americans are unfamiliar with the issues involved.

- **TENURE:** Depending on the wording, support ranges from 4 points to 26 points for ending tenure. But no matter how it is worded, teachers are strongly opposed. (Again, the age of the teachers may have affected this spread, as other polls have found older teachers are more vehemently opposed to changes to the system while younger teachers are more open to them.)
- **CHARTERS:** By ten points, voters want to increase the number of charter schools. However, teachers oppose charters by 43 points. Previous public polling on education has found that many voters do not know what a charter school is, and in our poll 17% had no opinion—the largest figure in the survey.
- **PERFORMANCE MEASURES:** Depending on how the question is asked, the results differ widely. Only 42% of voters and 21% of teachers think that “all staffing decisions, including hiring and firing, should be based only on a teacher’s impact on their students’ academic performance.” But by 23 points, Americans agree with this statement: “Teachers should be hired, fired, and promoted based on their students’ performance, not seniority.”
- **VOUCHERS:** Merely 43% of voters and 19% of teachers think we should be “using taxpayer dollars to help low-income public school students to attend private and parochial school.” This was the only proposal that garnered a majority of Americans in opposition, with 52% saying they opposed such a policy.

Number of Voters Who Support/Strongly Support K-12 Education Changes

[Strongly Support Data in Bold, Green Shows Strong Support over 50%, Red Under 30%]

Proposal	All	Democrats	Liberals	Teachers	Millennials
Ensuring that teachers in every state pass a rigorous test of content knowledge and teaching skills before entering the classroom	94% 74%	97% 76%	98% 73%	86% 62%	97% 77%
Ensuring hiring and firing decisions are made based on a teacher’s performance in the classroom, not seniority	87% 66%	82% 65%	78% 62%	64% 30%	95% 70%
Creating more opportunities for K through 12 public school teachers to earn promotions and raises	92% 65%	95% 73%	82% 44%	92% 67%	97% 70%
Allowing a teacher licensed in another state to more easily move and teach in your state	82% 52%	84% 56%	84% 52%	92% 56%	87% 53%
Providing monthly student loan forgiveness to teachers as long as they stay in the classroom	71% 42%	81% 46%	82% 44%	85% 69%	78% 38%
Holding teacher training colleges accountable for the job performance of the teachers they train	68% 40%	72% 48%	74% 51%	61% 28%	71% 34%
Ending teacher tenure in K through 12 public schools	46% 28%	42% 24%	32% 19%	25% 11%	44% 20%
Increasing the number of charter schools	47% 26%	45% 24%	47% 28%	26% 9%	52% 29%
Using taxpayer dollars to help low-income public school students to attend private and parochial school	43% 21%	43% 19%	49% 17%	19% 11%	52% 22%

Americans are clear that they want change, and support for a change narrative that focuses on attracting and retaining the next generation of excellent public school teachers is broad and deep. And for Democrats, this narrative counters the notions that the party is simply content to pour money into a broken system or back entrenched political interests to the detriment of kids.

A Modernizing Teaching Candidate Wins

Across the board, voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who supports policies that aim to modernize the teaching profession.

Nearly half of voters say they would be much more likely to pull the lever for a candidate who supports:

- “Creating more opportunities for K through 12 public school teachers to earn promotions and raises” (84% more likely, 48% much more likely);

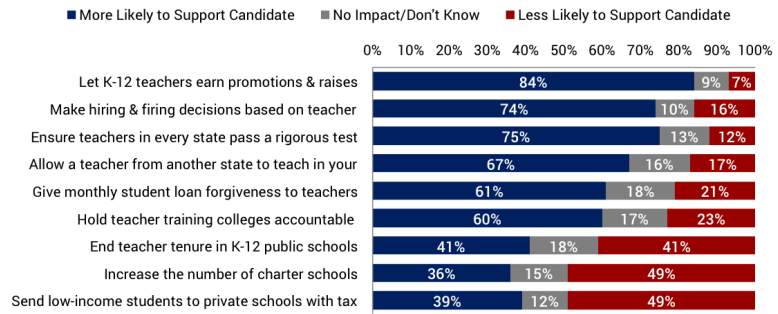
- “Ensuring hiring and firing decisions are made based on a teacher’s performance in the classroom, not seniority” (74% more likely, 46% much more likely); and,
- “Ensuring that teachers in every state pass a rigorous test of content knowledge and teaching skills before entering the classroom” (75% more likely, 44% much more likely).

Not only does a substantial portion of the electorate say they’d be *much* more likely to support a modernizing teaching candidate, the number of voters who said they’d be *much* less likely to support such a candidate doesn't even reach double digits.

The same is not true for candidates who support other education reforms. An equal number say a candidate’s support for ending teacher tenure would make them more or less likely to vote for that candidate. And increasing charter schools and using taxpayer dollars to help low-income students attend private school (vouchers) could actually earn a candidate more heat in opposition than support, though it’s possible some voters are conflating charter schools with private schools:

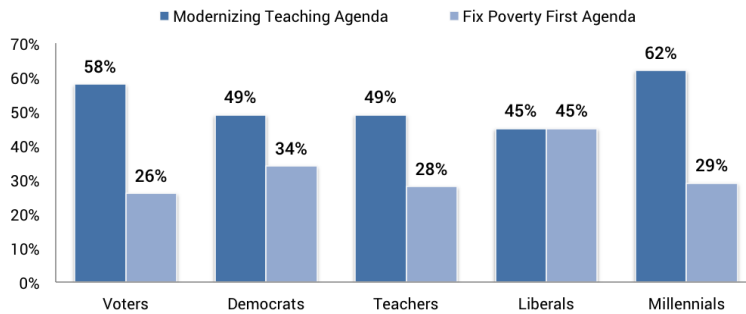
- 49% say they are less likely to vote for a candidate who wants to increase charter schools (with 32% much less likely), compared to 36% who say that position makes them more likely to vote for that candidate (21% much more).
- The numbers are nearly identical for vouchers, with 49% saying they would be less likely to support a candidate who embraces them (33% much less) and 39% saying they’d be more likely to support that candidate (20% much more).

The Modernizing Teaching Candidate Wins



Modernizing teaching also trumps the traditional union position—even among teachers. By a spread of 32 points, voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who said “modernizing the teaching profession is the best way to improve student learning” (58%) to one who says “we cannot fix our schools until we fix our poverty problem” (26%). Teachers concur, 49% to 28%. So do Democrats, 49% to 34%. And Millennials agree 62% to 29%. Even liberals see the two agendas as at least equally important, 45% to 45%.

Voter Support for Candidate who Touts Modernizing Teaching v. Fixing Poverty to Fix Schools



In addition, to the extent that the endorsement of teachers’ unions was crucial in the past to a Democratic candidate’s election, the numbers no longer tell that story. Only 20% of voters say they’d be more likely to vote for a candidate who is endorsed by the national teachers’ unions—a mirror image of the 21% who say that endorsement would make them less likely to support that candidate. A solid majority of voters (54%) say it would make no difference, including 59% of Democrats, 59% of Independents, 62% of liberals, and 46% of teachers. These numbers barely shift even if it is made clear

the unions go as far as *opposing* the candidate in question (rather than just withholding endorsement). Still, 51% of voters say it would make no difference at all, including 48% of Democrats, 60% of Independents, 43% of liberals, and 44% of teachers.

A full two-thirds of voters and the same number of teachers say they'd be more likely to support a candidate if they heard him or her say, "We need to make changes to the teaching profession to attract the next generation of excellent public school teachers." Yet this narrative is still up for grabs. When asked whether that statement would come from a Democrat or a Republican, voters were split nearly in thirds (39% Democrat, 31% Republican, 30% don't know)—as were teachers (33% Democrat, 24% Republican, 42% don't know). This fact offers Democrats an opportunity to champion a broadly popular narrative around modernizing the teaching profession. Doing so could revitalize their waning reputation as the party of education, avoid more divisive reform land mines, and offer a real chance to bring the country together to make the real changes that will significantly improve our schools.

Conclusion

Democrats have gone from a 25-point lead to single-digit edge on education. They can no longer assume that voters will trust them on education by default. Changing the subject by blaming poverty or a lack of funding won't cut it. To regain their historic edge on the issue of education, Democratic policymakers and candidates must show they are willing to shake up the status quo in real ways, like raising the bar for entry to the teaching profession, treating teachers like professionals by allowing them to earn promotions and raises based on their performance, and holding teacher colleges accountable for the job performance of the teachers they train. These changes could transform a career in teaching and make it attractive to the high-achieving Millennials we need to fill our classrooms over the next decade. And while some of them may ruffle feathers among those who have entrenched

interests in maintaining the status quo, a stance that ruffles no feathers won't suffice with voters.

END NOTES

- 1.** “Democrats vs. Republicans,” Polling Report.com, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2014. Available at: <http://www.pollingreport.com/dvsr.htm>.
- 2.** Global Strategy Group conducted a live telephone survey from November 11th to November 16th of 808 general election voters, with an oversample to reach 201 public school teachers. The margin of error at the 95% confidence level is 3.5% for voters at large and 7.0% for public school teachers. The sample of teachers surveyed skewed much older, with 113/201 teachers surveyed aged 50 years.