

# Education in the 2022 Gubernatorial Elections: Political Priorities Among Candidates and Winners

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## Introduction

Although most education policy decisions are made at the state level, America has been having a national debate over the future of our schools for the last several years. Arguments have raged over Covid-related closures and the resultant student learning loss, Critical Race Theory, school funding, parental choice, college debt, and more.

The 2022 campaign and election cycle provided an opportunity to better understand whether these national issues and narratives match those at the state level. By studying the educational agendas of gubernatorial candidates, we can also see whether there were differences between incumbents and nonincumbents, Republicans and Democrats, and candidates in red, blue, and swing states. Perhaps most important, with the election now behind us, we can see what the winners had in common and thereby forecast the next several years of state-level education reform.

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## Data

In 2022, 36 states had races for governor. Using campaign websites, I collected information on the education priorities of all 72 major-party candidates.<sup>1</sup> Most sites had an “Issues,” “Agenda,” or “Policies” page that explained what the candidates hoped to do if elected.<sup>2</sup> Based on those data, I created 27 issue categories; each category was supported by at least one candidate. These categories ranged from one supporter (limiting sex education and creating energy-efficient schools) to 30 supporters (expanding career-and-technical education [CTE] and increasing school funding).

For some issues—such as “improving student mental health”—every candidate who discussed the particular issue generally had the same types of reforms in mind. Although there might be nontrivial differences in different candidates’ plans (e.g., what types of services, who runs the programs, who funds the programs), they are all grouped in one category. For other issues—school choice, for example—candidates clearly adopt one of two approaches, so there are two categories (pro-school choice and anti-school choice).<sup>3</sup>

Some categories were simple to create and name because all candidates discussing it used very similar language—for instance, “reducing class size” and “increasing teacher pay.” But in some cases, a group of candidates had the same general idea, but their proposals varied significantly. One example relates to community colleges: some want free community college for all, some want more state funding for community-college programs, and some want more community-college scholarships.<sup>4</sup> Here, I created a single category: “expanding community college.” Similarly, responding to concerns about politicized classroom materials and instruction, some candidates advocated for a parents’ bill of rights, others proposed rules for curricular transparency, and others sought to explicitly limit critical race theory by name. Here, I created a single category called “curricular reform.”<sup>5</sup> A full list of categories is in the Appendix.

## Campaign Results

### All Candidates

Six issues were supported by at least 25% of all candidates (**Figure 1**). Topping the list were expanding CTE and increasing school funding. Since the public generally supports more money for schools, the popularity among candidates for greater spending is not a surprise. Likewise, given the concerns about student debt, the value of four-year college degrees, and low labor-force participation, it makes sense that candidates are in favor of CTE.

Rounding out this list are pro-school choice positions, expanding pre-K (early childhood programs), raising teacher pay, and curricular reform. Perhaps the most surprising omission from this list, considering how much attention it garnered over the last year, is the supposed nationwide teacher shortage. This was seldom highlighted by gubernatorial candidates. Though many candidates mentioned a variety of ways to support teachers, such as increased pay and benefits, only three candidates discussed the teacher-shortage issue.

Figure 1

### Most Popular Issues Among All Candidates

Category	Candidates	Percentage
Expanding CTE	30	42%
More K–12 Funding	30	42%
Pro-School Choice	24	33%
Expanding Pre-K	22	31%
Raising Teacher Pay	19	26%
Curricular Reform	19	26%

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## Democrats vs. Republicans

Democratic and Republican candidates differed significantly. Six issues were supported by at least eight Democratic candidates, with increasing funding, expanding pre-K, and expanding CTE at the top of the list (**Figure 2a**). Similarly, six issues were supported by at least eight Republican candidates, with pro-school choice, curricular reform, and expanding CTE at the top of the list (**Figure 2b**).

Figure 2a

### Most Popular Issues Among Democratic Candidates

Category	Candidates	Percentage
More K–12 Funding	22	61%
Expanding Pre-K	18	50%
Expanding CTE	15	42%
Raising Teacher Pay	14	39%
Expanding Community College	10	28%
Improving Mental Health	8	22%

Figure 2b

### Most Popular Issues Among Republican Candidates

Category	Candidates	Percentage
Pro-School Choice	23	64%
Curricular Reform	19	53%
Expanding CTE	15	42%
More K–12 Funding	8	22%
Pro-Charter	8	22%
Reading Instruction	8	22%

Notable areas of overlap: expanding CTE was supported by 15 Democrats and 15 Republicans; increasing funding was a top-six issue for candidates in both parties. Other issues with cross-partisan support included supporting the state’s university system (seven Democrats and six Republicans) and addressing Covid learning loss (six Democrats and six Republicans).<sup>6</sup>

More striking is the partisan difference on key issues (**Figure 3**). On some matters, support is strong among candidates of one party but negligible to nonexistent among candidates of the other party. Democratic gubernatorial nominees were far likelier than Republican nominees to support expanding pre-K and increasing teacher pay; not a single Republican mentioned expanded community college, which was among Democrats’ top issues. Even more stark is the lack of support among Democrats for school choice, curricular reform, and charter schools. Only one Democrat supported any of these (PA nominee Josh Shapiro supported school choice).

Several other issues had wide differences. No Republicans were anti-school choice, and none supported strengthening teachers’ unions / collective bargaining or reducing class sizes. These views were supported by six, four, and five Democrats, respectively. No Democrat was pro-homeschool or promised to protect women’s sports; four and three Republicans, respectively, did so.

Figure 3

**Wide Differences in Partisan Support on Key Issues**

Category	Democrats	Republicans
Expanding Pre-K	18	4
Increasing Teacher Pay	14	5
Expanding Community College	10	0
Pro-School Choice	1	23
Curricular Reform	0	19
Pro-Chararters	0	8

**Incumbents vs. Nonincumbents**

In the 2022 election, 13 Democrats were running for governor as incumbents, and 23 were running as nonincumbents (as challengers or in an open race). On many key issues, the set of Democratic incumbents mirrored nonincumbents (**Figure 4a**). For example, 62% of incumbent Democrats supported more school funding, as did 61% of nonincumbents; 54% and 48% of incumbents and nonincumbents, respectively, advocated for expanded pre-K.

Figure 4a

**Key Similarities Among Democratic Incumbents and Nonincumbents**

Category	Incumbents	Nonincumbents
More K–12 Funding	62%	61%
Expanding Pre-K	54%	48%
Raising Teacher Pay	38%	39%
Expanding Community College	38%	22%
Expanding CTE	31%	48%
Reducing Class Size	15%	13%
Addressing Covid Learning Loss	15%	17%
Improving Mental Health	15%	26%
Addressing Teacher Shortage	8%	9%
Improving School Safety	8%	9%

However, nonincumbent Democrats discussed several issues that no incumbent mentioned. Notably, 26% of nonincumbent Democrats articulated an anti-school choice position, 22% argued for less testing, and 17% supported strengthening teachers' unions / collective bargaining (**Figure 4b**). Perhaps nonincumbents believed that taking these positions would help them win their Democratic primaries and secure the support of politically important teachers' unions.

Figure 4b

**Key Differences Among Democratic Incumbents and Nonincumbents**

Category	Incumbents	Nonincumbents
Anti-School Choice	0%	26%
Reducing Testing	0%	22%
Strengthening Unions/Collective Bargaining	0%	17%
Pro-DEI/Desegregation	0%	13%
Reading Instruction	0%	13%
Local Control of K–12	0%	13%

Note: Examples of “Pro-DEI/Desegregation” include: “Schools must also be desegregated. The bias on our public school systems can still be felt today, and Yolanda will ensure that schools become more diverse,” and “Education reconstruction means more funding for public schools, better-trained teachers, and desegregation (Flowers, Alabama); “promote Diversity, Equity & Inclusion programs in local districts” (Healy, Massachusetts); “Expanding Diversity in STEM Jobs” (Hobbs, Arizona).

Interestingly, there was less similarity among incumbents and nonincumbents among Republicans. Certainly, the two groups had similar support rates on some issues, such as reading instruction, expanding pre-K, supporting the state’s public university system, and addressing Covid learning losses (Figure 5a). But in these instances, neither group overwhelmingly prioritized these issues.

Figure 5a

**Key Similarities Among Republican Incumbents and Nonincumbents**

Category	Incumbents	Nonincumbents
Reading Instruction	27%	19%
Expanding Pre-K	20%	5%
Supporting University System	20%	14%
Addressing Covid Learning Loss	13%	19%
Protecting Women’s Sports	13%	10%
Anti-Closure and Anti-Masks	7%	5%
Reducing Testing	7%	10%

On several issues, Republican incumbents were significantly likelier to express support than Republican nonincumbents (Figure 5b). Interestingly, on two issues generally associated with the political Left—lifting overall K–12 funding levels and teacher pay—the support level among Republican incumbents was closer to Democratic candidates than Republican nonincumbents.

Figure 5b

**Issues with Significantly Higher Support Among Republican Incumbents than Nonincumbents**

Category	Incumbents	Nonincumbents
More K–12 Funding	40%	10%
Raising Teacher Pay	27%	5%
Reading Instruction	27%	19%

Most notably, on some of the most prominent issues of the day, Republican nonincumbents were much likelier to express support than Republican incumbents (**Figure 5c**). For instance, Republican nonincumbents were overwhelmingly likely to express support for school choice and curricular reforms. Not a single Republican incumbent expressed support for charters, but 38% of Republican nonincumbents did. Perhaps incumbents, generally not needing to worry about a difficult primary race, were more focused on potential general-election issues, whereas nonincumbents (needing to win a primary) were more focused on earning the support of base voters.

Figure 5c

### Issues with Significantly Higher Support Among Republican Nonincumbents than Incumbents

Category	Incumbents	Nonincumbents
Pro-School Choice	40%	81%
Curricular Reform	20%	76%
Expanding CTE	20%	57%
Pro-Charter	0%	38%
School Safety	7%	29%
Pro-Homeschooling	0%	14%
Improving Mental Health	0%	14%

### Red States, Blue States, and Swing States

To understand whether candidates' views differed based on the political leanings of the populations they hoped to lead, I compared those running in red states, swing states, and blue states. Red states were those where President Biden received less than 47% of the popular vote in 2020; swing states were those where Biden received 47%–53% of the 2020 popular vote; in blue states, Biden received more than 53%. There were 14 red states, 9 swing states, and 13 blue states.

Figure 6

### Differing Levels of Support Among Democrats in Blue, Swing, and Red States

Category	Blue	Swing	Red
Expanding Pre-K	69%	44%	36%
More K–12 Funding	54%	89%	50%
Expanding Community College	54%	11%	14%
Raising Teacher Pay	38%	33%	43%
Supporting University System	38%	0%	14%
Expanding CTE	31%	67%	36%
Addressing Covid Learning Loss	15%	33%	7%
Improving Mental Health	15%	44%	14%

Democratic nominees were similar across the three types of states (**Figure 6**). The most notable differences were between blue-state and swing-state Democrats. Those in states that President Biden won comfortably supported the more traditional, higher-dollar initiatives, such as expanding pre-K and community college and raising K–12 funding levels and teacher pay. Swing-state Democrats also supported more spending, but they were more likely to prioritize two practical issues highly relevant in the wake of Covid: addressing students' mental health and

academic losses. But the most striking difference relates to postsecondary education. Whereas blue-state Democrats were much more likely to discuss investments in their states' community colleges and university systems, swing-state Democrats were much more likely to discuss CTE.

Among Republican candidates, we see a clear split between those in red states and those in blue and swing states (Figure 7). On some issues, such as expanding CTE and increasing teacher pay, the three GOP groups were similar (strong support on the former, weak on the latter). But on several of the highest-profile issues, red-state Republican candidates were *less likely* to publicly advocate for the position generally associated with Republicans today.

Figure 7

### Differing Levels of Support Among Republicans in Blue, Swing, and Red States

Category	Blue	Swing	Red
Curricular Reform	69%	78%	21%
Pro-School Choice	69%	89%	43%
Pro-Chararters	54%	11%	0%
Addressing Covid Learning Loss	23%	33%	0%
School Safety	23%	44%	0%
Supporting University System	15%	33%	7%
Improving Mental Health	15%	11%	0%
More K–12 Funding	8%	22%	36%
Pro-Homeschool	8%	22%	0%

For example, though Republican nominees were highly likely in blue and swing states to support curricular reforms (e.g., parents' bills of rights and anti-CRT measures), only one in five Republican nominees in red states advocates for such policies. Similarly, blue- and swing-state GOP nominees were considerably more likely to support school choice. One of the most striking findings relates to charters: more than half of blue-state GOP nominees articulated a pro-charter position, but not a single red-state GOP nominee did so. Interestingly, red-state GOP nominees were four times more likely to advocate for more K–12 funding than blue-state GOP nominees.

How is this possible? Perhaps instruction in school districts in blue states had alarmed GOP candidates while instruction in red-state districts had not. As a result, GOP nominees in blue states could have felt the need to advocate for state-level curricular reforms while GOP nominees in red states could have felt less need to do so. A related hypothesis is that Republicans in red states believe that their states have already successfully addressed this issue, so campaigning on it was unnecessary. Legislation related to parents' rights, critical race theory, curricular transparency, and similar matters had passed in Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Wyoming. In many of these states (AL, ID, IA, NV, NH, OK, SC, TN, TX, WY), the Republican candidates did not mention these issues; but in some states (AZ, FL, GA), Republican candidates did. In the other states, there was no race for governor in 2022 (KY, MS, MT, ND, UT, VA).

Similarly, perhaps red-state GOP candidates approve of the behavior and performance of their public schools, meaning that they feel little need to advocate school-choice and charter reforms, while blue-state GOP nominees' frustration with public schools caused them to support more

educational alternatives. Indeed, for a host of reasons related to history, geography, and funding, many of the states that have no charter school law or no school choice program are red politically (e.g., AK, ID, MO, MT, NE, ND, SD, TX, WY).<sup>7</sup>

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## Election Results

Of those candidates who won, the top issue was more K–12 funding, followed closely by expanding pre-K and expanding CTE (**Figure 8**). One in four winners also supported increasing teacher pay and expanding school choice.

**Figure 8**

### Top Issue Among Winners

More K–12 Funding	50%
Expanding Pre-K	39%
Expanding CTE	36%
Raising Teacher Pay	25%
Pro-School Choice	25%

These figures mask an important result from the 2022 gubernatorial elections. In the 14 red states, 13 Republicans won (the only Democratic winner was Kansas incumbent Laura Kelly). In the 13 blue states, 12 Democrats won (the only Republican winner was Vermont incumbent Phil Scott). In the nine swing states, results were split: five Democrats and four Republicans won.

This becomes important because, as demonstrated above, Democrats running in blue states differed from Democrats running in swing and red states, and Republicans running in red states differed from Republicans running in swing and blue states. It is true that 18 Republicans won and 18 Democrats won; but for the purposes of this study, it's highly relevant that 13 red-state Republicans and 12 blue-state Democrats won.

As shown in **Figure 9**, there is one key similarity among winners across the three different types of states. Increasing K–12 funding is a top-five issue among winners in blue, swing, and red states. But that's where the commonality ends; no other issue was in the top five of all three types of states.

In blue states, winners supported high-dollar issues typically associated with the political Left—not just higher overall spending but also growing pre-K programs, lifting teacher pay, and expanding community college.

One interesting finding is that among winners in both red and swing states, the top three issues were the same: more K–12 funding, expanding CTE, and pro-school choice. Notably, in blue states, winners prioritized higher education (community college and university systems); in swing and red states, winners prioritized expanding CTE.



Figure 9

**Top Issues Among Winners in Different States**

	<b>Blue</b>	<b>Swing</b>	<b>Red</b>
<b>Top</b>	Expanding Pre-K	More K–12 Funding	Pro-School Choice
<b>Second</b>	More K–12 Funding	Expanding CTE	Expanding CTE
<b>Third</b>	Expanding Community College	Pro-School Choice	More K–12 Funding
<b>Fourth</b>	Raising Teacher Pay	Expanding Pre-K	Reading Instruction
<b>Fifth</b>	Supporting University System	Addressing Covid Learning Loss	Raising Teacher Pay

Several issues were prominent among candidates or in the national conversation but did not end up among winners' top priorities (Figure 10).

Figure 10

**Prominent Issues Not Widely Advocated Among Winners**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Candidates</b>	<b>Winners</b>
Curricular Reform	19	4
Addressing Covid Learning Loss	12	5
Pro-Charters	8	0
Anti-School Choice	6	2
Strengthening Unions/Collective Bargaining	4	1
Addressing Teacher Shortage	3	1

Curricular reform was a top issue among blue- and swing-state Republican candidates, but few of those candidates won. Remarkably, eight Republican candidates advocated for charters (seven in blue states and one in a swing state). All those candidates lost. To put a fine point on this: given that no Democrat supported charters, zero of the 36 incoming governors articulated pro-charter positions.

Though Covid learning loss has been a major national story, only 12 candidates openly discussed it, and only five of those candidates won. Similarly, the teacher-shortage problem got minimal attention among candidates, and it was discussed by only one winner. Only six Democratic candidates articulated anti-school choice positions, and only two of those won (both in very blue states).

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## Conclusion: The State of the States

With three simple pieces of information, the 2022 gubernatorial elections make a great deal of sense. Candidates' party affiliations, their states' political preferences, and whether they were incumbents or not help explain which education issues were prioritized.

When we look at all 72 major-party candidates, a mélange of issues rose to the top. Six seemingly unrelated positions were embraced by 25%–50% of candidates. But once we separate candidates by party, the picture becomes clearer. Higher K–12 spending and enhanced CTE were top issues for Democrats and Republicans alike. But Democratic candidates prioritized a set of

issues—increasing teacher pay, growing pre-K programs, and expanding community college—generally associated with the political Left. Republican candidates prioritized school choice and curricular reforms.

But were there differences among Democrats and among Republicans? Yes. Nonincumbent Democrats were likelier to express support for less mainstream issues—for example, strengthening teachers’ unions / collective bargaining and opposition to school choice. On the Republican side, incumbents—compared with nonincumbents—were likelier to support issues generally associated with Democrats, such as increased K–12 spending and teacher pay. Republican nonincumbents were likelier than incumbents to express support for curricular reforms, school choice, and charter schools.

Republican candidates’ and Democratic candidates’ positions also varied, based on the partisan leanings of their states. Swing-state Democrats were likelier to voice support for two practical issues related to the fallout from Covid: improving student mental health and addressing learning loss. Even more interestingly, whereas blue-state Democrats prioritized investments in their states’ community colleges and university systems, swing-state Democrats were much more likely to discuss CTE.

Among Republican candidates, those in blue and swing states were likelier to express positions that suggested deep frustration with public education. Blue-state and swing-state Republicans were likelier to support curricular reforms, school choice, and charter schools. Red-state Republicans, on the other hand—possibly because they were more supportive of their public schools—were four times likelier than blue-state Republicans to advocate for more K–12 funding.

The final piece of the puzzle is the non-wave results in November. Neither side did unusually well. Republicans won almost all elections in red states, and most of these winners were incumbents. Democrats won almost all elections in blue states, and most of these winners were incumbents. Republicans and Democrats split the swing states, but most of the winners were—again—incumbents. As a result, the incoming set of governors reflect the views of red-state incumbent Republicans and blue-state incumbent Democrats. Across all states, winners embraced more K–12 funding. But in blue states, the incoming governors supported traditionally Democratic positions on teacher pay, pre-K, and community colleges. In swing states and red states, school choice and expanded CTE were the top issues among winners.

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# Appendix

## Education Categories

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1. Addressing Covid learning loss
2. Addressing teacher shortage
3. Anti-closure and anti-masks
4. Anti-school choice
5. Curricular reform
6. Energy-efficient schools
7. Expanding community college
8. Expanding CTE
9. Expanding pre-K
10. Improving mental health
11. Limiting sex ed
12. Local control of K–12
13. More K–12 funding
14. Pro-charters
15. Pro-DEI/desegregation
16. Pro-homeschooling
17. Pro-school choice
18. Protecting women's sports
19. Raising teacher pay
20. Reading instruction
21. Reducing class size
22. Reducing testing
23. School safety
24. School-supply tax holiday
25. Strengthening unions/collective bargaining
26. Supporting state university system
27. Reforming teacher training

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This report only studied campaign websites. Candidates could have discussed additional issues in media ads or stump speeches.
- <sup>2</sup> A few incumbents had no dedicated issues page or just a few vague sentences on policy topics (meaning that education was just one of the many subjects given little or no attention). Perhaps these candidates saw political benefit in relying on the natural advantages of incumbency instead of laying out a vision. See campaign websites for Iowa’s Kim Reynolds, Alaska’s Mike Dunleavy, South Carolina’s Henry McMaster, California’s Gavin Newsom, and Kansas’s Laura Kelly. In these instances, the campaign websites function primarily to introduce the candidate, share news clips, and raise money. For other incumbents, campaign websites discussed only what the incumbent prioritized in the first term—often on an “accomplishments” page (see Connecticut’s Ned Lamont, Michigan’s Gretchen Whitmer, and New Hampshire’s Chris Sununu). For the purposes of this study, this look-backward approach at least gives us a sense of the issues that the candidates care about.
- <sup>3</sup> In this study, school choice is differentiated from charters. The former consists of programs that include private schools (e.g., vouchers, education savings accounts); the latter consists only of charter-school programs. This distinction is necessary because two GOP candidates articulated support for public school choice but not private school choice. “Increasing options for public school choice:… I will work to expand public school choice offerings both through our charter school network and traditional public schools” (Ashley Kalus, Rhode Island); and “Expand access to school choice, including restoring open enrollment and supporting charter schools and magnet schools.”
- <sup>4</sup> For instance, growing a community-college grant program aimed at STEM students and developing four-year programs at community colleges (Jones, Arkansas); helping adults earn professional certifications at community colleges (Hobbs, Arizona); facilitating dual-enrollment programs between high schools and community colleges (Crist, Florida); free community college for all high school graduates (Green, Hawaii); increasing state aid to community colleges (Pritzker, Illinois).
- <sup>5</sup> Three other narrower curriculum-related subjects got their own categories: reading instruction, limiting sex education, and improving mental health.
- <sup>6</sup> “Supporting state university system” typically reflects candidates’ commitment to maintain or increase funding. But in some instances, candidates’ promises relate to other supports, such as helping universities integrate technical certificates into their programs (Jones, Arkansas), focusing universities on student success (Ganahl, Colorado), and strengthening tenure reviews (DeSantis, Florida).
- <sup>7</sup> See American Federation for Children Growth Fund, “Where Is School Choice?”