



Who's for Public Education?

Give Kids Good Schools Guide to Elected Officials and Candidates

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Many officials claim to be “the education candidate,” and it be hard to determine who really is for public education. This guide is designed to help voters recognize key public education issues and ask informed questions of candidates and office holders.

About This Guide

Elected officials at every level have a responsibility to ensure that all children have quality public schools. In turn, individuals have a powerful role when it comes to electing candidates and passing measures that support quality public education.

As citizens, we have the ability to set high expectations for public education, elect school board members, pay taxes to support public schools, vote for school bond referenda and elect public officials who fulfill campaign promises.

This guide is written for everyone who wants to know how to recognize questions and issues that impact quality public education. You'll find tips on what qualities to look for in a "public education candidate" along with key questions and facts to help you evaluate where elected officials and candidates stand on critical education issues. Share it with friends, family and others who want our elected officials to Give Kids Good Schools.

How to Evaluate Responses

As you consider the questions in this guide, use your own knowledge and ideas about public education to evaluate candidate responses. For example, when asking about a candidate's top priorities for improving public education, consider your own opinions about what could be improved. Did the candidate's response address your concerns? Were other valid points mentioned?

When evaluating candidates' responses and positions on public education, it may be helpful to think about your own answers to the following questions. These may also spur other questions for school leaders and elected officials.

1. What challenges face public schools in my community?
2. What do I like about my public school? What is working well?
3. Are schools performing as well as I would like them to perform? Are students leaving college— and career-ready?
4. What changes or improvements would I like to see so that students do leave school college— and career-ready?
5. Does every student attend a quality public school? If not, what is preventing that from happening?
6. Do students and teachers have the support they need to succeed and become college— and career-ready? If not, what do I think could help their efforts?
7. Do schools and the district provide me with information about school and student performance that is clear and easy to understand? If not, what information and format would be helpful to me?

What is a “Public Education Candidate?”

Public officials often run as “the education candidate,” but what does it really mean to stand for quality public education not only as a candidate but once that candidate is elected to office? A strong public education candidate and elected official will:

- Value public schools and make public education a high priority in their political platform
- Seek information and feedback from the public about priority education issues
- Is not afraid to take unpopular positions on behalf of students and public education
- Be able to clearly state his/her public education priorities
- Provide feedback to the electorate about how he/she voted on education issues
- Believe that every child can learn and become college- and career-ready
- Be knowledgeable of school reform and strategies to improve public schools so that all students graduate college- and career- ready
- Know education policy and the role their office plays in public education
 - “Education policy” refers to the federal, state, and local laws that govern public education
- Engage the community to learn its views about public schools
 - Town meetings, community conversations, face-to-face discussions, and polling are some of the ways candidates may engage the community
- Have prior experience with public education policy
- Be able to articulate what he/she will do to improve school quality
- Have a realistic plan to support and improve public education, and ensure adequate resources for all schools
- Communicate who will be accountable for student and school performance

Views and Priorities

1. What are your views on the value and importance of public education?

Facts: 49 million students attend K-12 public schools in the United States. Public schools offer a free public education to every child in the nation no matter race, religion or ability.

2. What are your top priorities for improving public education?

Facts: While many public schools are producing great results for children, many fail to provide the resources and support students need to succeed. Education finance, teacher recruitment and retention, and efforts to comply with standards and accountability as outlined by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), are just some of the critical issues facing public schools.

3. What will you do to improve quality?

Facts: Across the country, public school districts are undertaking major school reform efforts. Some promising efforts to improve school quality include:

- **Improve teaching:** Districts are providing more training and mentoring for teachers, following NCLB requirements that teachers be highly qualified.
- **Raise requirements:** States and districts are requiring higher levels of achievement including new graduation requirements and higher levels of academics in every grade.
- **Small learning communities:** Many large urban districts are creating small learning communities, schools within schools, and new small schools with classes and course content based on themes like math and science, arts and humanities, health and more.
- **Early education:** States and districts are expanding kindergarten programs and funding preschools so students enter kindergarten ready to learn.

College— and Career-Readiness

1. What do you think it means to be considered college- and career-ready?

Fact: Only seven out of ten students are graduating from high school. Half of those who do graduate are prepared for four-year colleges without remediation.

2. What would you do to ensure students graduate from high school ready for college and a career?

Fact: Over a quarter of college freshmen need to take remedial courses that cover material that should have been learned in high school. A lot of business leaders also feel that high school graduates are not well-prepared for the workplace, both in terms of writing and math.

3. Do you think college- and career-readiness is an important goal? Why or why not?

Facts: Adults who earn a bachelor's degree make more money in their lifetime, are 5-8 times less likely to end up in prison, are less likely to become unemployed and live in poverty, and have a longer life expectancy.

High Expectations for Every Student

1. How will you support the goal of high achievement for every student?

Facts: Ongoing student assessments, like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), show that student performance is improving nationally but not in all subjects and not in all grades. Even with some improvement, proficiency scores are low. In 2009 just 25 percent of fourth graders score proficient or better in reading, and 39 percent score proficient or better in math. Among eighth graders, 32 percent were proficient or better in reading and 34 percent in math. Among 12th graders, 38 percent were at or above proficient in reading and 26 percent in mathematics.

2. What strategies do you propose schools and teachers use to help every student reach their potential?

Facts: Across the country, states, school districts and individual schools are adopting new strategies to increase student achievement like:

- Higher expectations and greater academic requirements
- Curricula and coursework tied to themes and student interests
- Project-based learning
- Combining best of traditional and constructivist methods of teaching

- Course content with less coverage but more depth
- Longer school days and school years
- Better use of afterschool time for homework help, tutoring, meeting with teachers
- Block scheduling or double periods
- Increased/improved literacy programs at all levels
- Advisory programs, peer support, and mentors
- Stronger links between high school and college/careers including making college expectations align with high school graduation requirements
- Small schools or small learning communities

3. What will you do to address the achievement gap?

Facts: Students from historically disadvantaged minority groups (American Indian, Latino, African American) have little more than a 50-50 chance of finishing high school with a diploma.

In 2007 only 56% of Latinos successfully finish high school, while 54 percent of African Americans and 51 percent of American Indians graduate.

Parent and Community Support

1. What role do you believe parents and the community play in improving our public schools?

Fact: A 2002 research synthesis by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory showed evidence that students with involved parents did better in school regardless of race or income level—and that teacher outreach and school programs helped parents become more involved. The federal legislation No Child Left Behind requires that school districts provide assistance in developing parental involvement programs.

2. How will you engage the community, and help schools engage the community to improve our public schools?

Fact: According to NCLB, states must provide school districts assistance in developing parental involvement programs. Additionally, if a school is identified for improvement, a school must establish a team of parents and community representatives to develop a plan of action to improve the school.

3. How do you propose districts share information about school and student performance with parents and the community?

Facts: According to NCLB, states and school districts must publish and distribute an annual student performance report card that provides parents and the community with comparative information about performance at the school district and individual school levels, based on state assessments.

Rigorous Curriculum and Fair Assessments

1. What kinds of courses and curriculum do you believe schools should provide in order to prepare students with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in higher education, work, and life?

Fact: Studies show that all students can benefit from a high-level college-preparatory curriculum. The American Diploma Project recommends higher standards drawing on:

- Math content including Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, and Data Analysis and Statistics
- English content that includes strong oral and written communication skills
- Advanced analytic and reasoning skills

The minimums recommended by the National Commission on Excellence in Education are four English, three Social Studies, three Science, three Math and two Foreign Language courses. To date, 26 states require, or are planning to require, that students pass a high school exit exam in order to graduate.

2. What do you believe are the most effective ways to evaluate school and student performances?

Fact: A well-designed, large-scale standardized achievement-testing program is an essential element of a fully matured, standards-based public education system. Such tests serve a variety of critical instructional and accountability purposes. They can provide students with an incentive to study hard and do well. They can provide rich diagnostic information for classroom and school-level decisions about appropriate instructional practice. They can be an important source of external validation on how well children are learning to standards and thus provide critical guidance on policy decisions at the district, community, state, and national levels.

3. What is your position on NCLB?

Fact: The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) strives to have every student achieving at a proficient level by the 2013-2014 school year. To achieve this objective, NCLB focuses on a range of elements including the development of state standards, assessment systems, and accountability measures that measure and hold schools, districts and states accountable for student achievement.

Sufficient Resources That Help All Students Achieve

1. What is your position on early-learning and afterschool programs for students?

Facts: Research shows that quality early-learning programs and quality afterschool programs have a positive impact on student success. Afterschool programs, tutoring, internships, job shadowing, college preparation programs, sports programs and volunteer activities are just some of the activities that schools and community organizations can collaborate on to provide additional learning opportunities for students.

A 1999 longitudinal study of nearly 1,000 low-income minority children who participated in Chicago Child-Parent Centers found higher reading scores, less frequent retention, lesser assignment to special education, reduced likelihood of involvement in the juvenile justice system, and higher high school graduation rates.

2. What is your plan to provide adequate funding for all schools?

Facts: According to the *Digest of Education Statistics*, U.S. public schools spent an average of \$9,683 per student. However, because more than 90 percent of school funding comes from state and local sources, per-student spending varies widely among states. For example, in the 2007 fiscal year, public schools in Utah spent a total of \$2,987,810, while public schools in Vermont spent a total of \$1,300,149. Even within states, funding is not evenly distributed across districts or schools.

3. What resources and services, beyond academics, do you believe schools and the community should provide to support student well-being and achievement?

Fact: Afterschool programs, tutoring, internships, job shadowing, college preparation programs, sports programs and volunteer activities are just some of the activities that schools and community organizations can collaborate on to provide additional learning opportunities for students.

Safe, Healthy and Supportive Learning Environments

1. Do you believe existing school facilities are safe and adequate?

Fact: Safe, sound facilities and student enrichment activities create an environment where students can learn and grow. The physical condition of public schools plays an important role in student and teacher safety. In 1999, the average age of a public school's main instructional building was 40 years. In a survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, 44 percent of public schools reported that the environmental factors of their building affected their level of instruction.

2. What strategies would you implement to increase school safety?

Fact: Statistically, schools are still one of the safest places for children—students are less likely to be the victims of crime at school than away from school. While crime in schools has decreased over the last decade, in 2007, 4% of students age 12-18 report being victimized at school in last 6 months, 12 percent of 9th-12th graders reported being in a physical fight on school property, and 6 percent reported they had carried a weapon on school property.

3. What activities or programs would you support to enrich students' learning?

Facts: U.S. Department of Education research suggests that youth in quality before and after school programs do better in school, are less likely to use drugs and alcohol, and are less likely to drop out of high school. A study in 2003 revealed that eighty nine percent of Americans say afterschool programs are important. Seventy six percent think after school programs are important to helping address the dropout crisis.

4. What training or resources do you think teachers should receive to better support their work?

Facts: In 2010, the National Center for Education statistics reports that 12% of teachers whose main assignment is secondary math had no major or certification in that subject. This was higher than English which was 8% of teachers and science which was 4%. For schools where the student body was half white only 8% of math teachers had no major or certification, which was significantly lower than schools were half the student body is African American (25%).

Schools Equipped for Teaching and Learning

1. How would you ensure that schools receive the technology, textbooks and resources they need?

Facts: Students and staff have access to timely, relevant resources including up-to-date textbooks and current technology. In the 2006-07 school year, combined U.S. public schools spent \$38,332,617 on supplies, including textbooks.

2. How would you promote innovative use of technology in the classroom and among school and district staff?

Facts: In 2008 100% of classrooms had at least one computer with internet access. 97% of schools had one or more instructional computers in classrooms and 58% of classrooms had laptops on carts.

Qualified Teachers in Every Classroom

1. What is your position on, and how would you evaluate teacher quality?

Facts: There is no agreed-upon way to measure teacher quality, but research confirms what many of us know from experience: good teaching matters. In fact, studies show a 50 percent point difference in the standardized test scores of students who have been taught by high-quality teachers for three years, compared to those taught to by low-quality teachers. However, studies suggest that nearly half of new teachers leave the profession within five years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, dissatisfied teachers cite a lack of planning time, too heavy a workload, too low a salary, problematic student behavior, and a lack of influence over school policy as reasons for leaving.

2. What kinds of support would you provide for teachers to help them meet the definition of “high qualified” as outlined by NCLB?

Facts: Highly qualified teachers who benefit from continuous professional development strengthen teaching and learning. As outlined by *No Child Left Behind*, to be deemed 'highly qualified,' teachers must: 1) Have a bachelor's degree, 2) Have full state certification or licensure, 3) Prove that they know each subject they teach. High school and middle school teachers can prove they know the subject through a college major or graduate degree, passing a state test, obtaining advanced state certification, or meeting the High, Objective, Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE).

3. How do you propose districts recruit and retain high qualified teachers?

Facts: Studies suggest that anywhere from 30 to 50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years. When demographics such as retirement of current teachers and increases in student enrollment are factored in, studies predict that between 1.7 million to 2.7 million new teachers would need to be hired between 1999 and 2009. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, among teachers who leave the profession, many report a lack of planning time, too heavy a workload, too low a salary, problematic student behavior, and a lack of influence over school policy among their top five sources of dissatisfaction with the school they left.

Strong School Leadership

1. If elected, what responsibility and authority would you have for public education?

Facts: Principals are empowered to lead and make informed decisions that promote learning. Elected officials at every level can help to support and improve public schools by setting high standards, making sure schools have adequate resources, and developing ways to reward effective schools and restructure those that are not successful.

2. Who do you think should be responsible for ensuring that public schools operate effectively, and that all students achieve at the highest levels?

Facts: Everyone is responsible for public schools. Elected officials at every level can help to support and improve public schools by setting high standards for schools and making sure public schools have adequate resources; teachers and school administrators can set high expectations for students and provide them with the academic support they need to succeed; community organizations, businesses and higher education institutions can share resources or partner on in- and out-of-school programs; and parents and non-parents can stay informed about how schools are doing in their community and help to reinforce the value of a quality public education.

3. How would you support school leaders at the local level (i.e. superintendents, principals, etc.)

Facts: Surveys conducted by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan opinion research group, found that a majority of superintendents and principals believe their efforts to improve schools are often hampered by politics and bureaucracy and that they need more autonomy to reward good teachers and fire ineffective ones. Superintendents and principals also point to funding and the time it takes to implement local, state, and federal mandates as their biggest challenges. 88 percent of superintendents say they experienced an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources to fulfill them.

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