

**TO: Interested Parties**  
**FROM: Geoff Garin, Guy Molyneux, Alicia Simmons**  
**DATE: June 21, 2022**  
**RE: Democratic Messaging on Public Education**

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*Hart Research Associates conducted a survey on public education as a 2022 political issue. We interviewed 1,758 likely voters in seven key battleground states<sup>1</sup> from May 21 to 30, 2022, and the survey's confidence interval is  $\pm 2.4$  percentage points. This memo reviews the survey's message recommendations for Democratic officials and candidates.*

Neither party enjoys a clear advantage on the issue of education today (39% trust the GOP, 38% trust Democrats). While voters share many Democratic priorities for improving education, such as addressing the teacher shortage, some Republican culture war attacks on schools have concerned voters. Strong, confident Democratic communication on educating our kids and getting politics out of schools can blunt these GOP attacks and begin to restore the party's advantage on education. The survey identifies four key elements for effective Democratic education messaging:

- Make clear that Republicans are politicizing education—pushing a political agenda that diverts public schools from their core mission of educating children—while Democrats want schools to focus on fundamentals to help students succeed;
- Communicate a commitment to making needed investments in education, including literacy programs, career and technical education, and addressing the teacher shortage, so that all children have access to excellent public schools;
- Expose Republicans' extremism, especially their efforts to ban books from schools, and highlight the importance of providing children an honest and accurate education, to undercut GOP culture war attacks;
- Emphasize the important role that parents have in delivering a quality education for children. We stand together with parents and teachers, and against politicians who seek to divide our communities for political gain.

We recommend the following core education message for Democrats, which appeals to far more voters than the Republicans' culture war attacks on schools.

***Instead of banning books and censoring curriculums, Democrats are focused on investing in our schools. We work with parents and teachers to make the investments our kids need to thrive, like smaller class sizes, mental health resources, and career and technical education. Students need an honest and accurate education, so they are prepared to succeed in a diverse society. If we put politics aside, and focus on making sure all children have access to excellent public schools, we can build a better future for our country.***

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<sup>1</sup> Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

**Democrats should not take a defensive posture on education issues. We have powerful criticisms to make of Republicans on this issue, and we must take every opportunity to go on the offense. Here is our recommended core critique of Republicans:**

***Republican politicians divert essential funding from public schools to fund private schools and pay for tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. And their culture war attacks are politicizing education and diverting public schools from their core mission of educating our children.***

The survey demonstrates that the following are all powerful specific criticisms of the Republican approach on education.

- *Republicans consistently refuse to make needed investments in our public schools, using the money to fund private schools and tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, instead.*
- *Republicans have the wrong priorities: they are focused on banning books from the school curriculum and school libraries, including recognized works of literature, while doing nothing about the teacher shortage.*
- *Republicans are pushing extreme policies, like criminally prosecuting teachers as child abusers if they teach children all of America’s history.*
- *Republicans want to censor the truth of our history and erase leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., from our books and classrooms, instead of preparing children to live in a diverse nation.*
- *Republicans don’t respect teachers—they spend more time tearing teachers down than supporting them.*

Note that criticisms of Republicans that focus explicitly on their support for “Don’t Say Gay” laws or other attacks on LGBTQ+ students generally prove less compelling to battleground voters.

**The best strategy for blunting the GOP’s culture war attacks is highlighting the importance of providing children an honest and accurate education, focusing attention on opponents’ most extreme policies (especially banning books), and reminding voters that the Republican strategy of politicizing schools is undermining our children’s education.**

- *Schools should teach the truth of our history so children can reckon with our past, understand our present, and create a better future.*
- *Schools should teach children to treat other people with respect and to understand our country’s diversity.*
- *Instead of banning books and censoring curriculums, we should give children an honest and accurate education to prepare them to succeed in a diverse society.*
- *Students should learn all of American history, the good and the bad.*
- *Education is about teaching children the facts—not a political agenda, as Republicans seek to do.*

- *We teach young people about these issues to prepare them to build a better future for our nation—this is not about assigning blame for bad historical acts.*
- *Teachers want to keep politics out of the classroom and teach children the life skills and knowledge they need to succeed.*
- *Sensitive topics like race or gender must always be taught in an age-appropriate way.*

These messages will allow Democrats to respond confidently and effectively to Republican attacks on LGBTQ+ students and students of color. At the same time, voters don't want public schools to lose focus on their core mission. In their eyes, that means making sure students have strong fundamental academic skills, critical thinking and reasoning skills, and practical life skills, so they are prepared to succeed in college or careers. Voters see a role for schools to teach about race and gender identity—in an age-appropriate way—but not as their central mission. Voters need reassurance that Democrats get this, and have not forgotten that job #1 in education is providing students with the core academic and life skills they need to succeed.

The political high ground in education debates will be held by whichever side is seen as focused on advancing education fundamentals, while the side seen as politicizing education will be at a distinct disadvantage. In fact, it is Republicans who are diverting schools from their core mission, by attacking teachers and dividing communities for their own political gain. By contrast, Democrats stand with parents and teachers, committed to working together to help students succeed.

**Whenever possible, focus attention on Democrats' investment agenda for public education, and contrast it with Republicans' refusal to address schools' real problems. While Democrats have effective rebuttals to GOP culture war attacks, we always want to move the debate back to investing in schools, which is our comparative advantage.**

These commitments by a Democratic candidate are all embraced by more than 60% of battleground voters (more than any Republican candidate message tested):

- Expand literacy and reading programs for struggling students.
- Expand access to career and technical education and other vocational programs that prepare students for jobs.
- Help schools to address shortages of qualified teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, and nurses.
- Reduce class sizes, especially in the early grades, to allow more individualized instruction and attention.
- Strengthen mental health and counseling services for public school students and staff.
- Improve and modernize school buildings, including ventilation systems, to create a safe and healthy environment.
- Increase teacher salaries, to address the teacher shortage and reduce class sizes.
- Increasing access to affordable pre-K and early childhood education programs.

**Frame Republican politicians, not parents, as the threat to public education. Acknowledge parents' important role in education and the need for parental input on curriculum issues. Republicans try to divide parents and teachers, which weakens schools and harms students; Democrats stand *with* parents and teachers, committed to improving public schools for all children.**

- *We support teachers and parents who work together to help students succeed, and we should not let Republican politicians divide us.*
- *Republican politicians are dividing our communities and diverting schools from their job of educating students. They started these fights, not teachers.*
- *We should not let Republican politicians use culture war battles to distract us from the core mission of educating students.*