

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 21, 2008
Published in Print: October 22, 2008

★ Campaign '08★

[Complete Coverage ▶](#)

Education on the Ballot

School issues haven't drawn as much attention in the presidential race as many educators would like. But there are differences between John McCain and Barack Obama on education. And such issues figure in state and congressional races, as well as in state ballot proposals.

By [David J. Hoff](#) and [Alyson Klein](#)

Education will be on the ballot Nov. 4, even if the subject hasn't been on voters' minds much during the 2008 campaign season.

The results of the elections are likely to have a significant impact on the way schools are financed, governed, and held accountable for the academic performance of their students.

At the polls, voters will be choosing the next president and members of Congress, who will decide the future of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. They'll elect governors in 11 states, state legislators in 44 states, and local officials in hundreds of cities, towns, counties, and school districts across the country. They'll also weigh a host of education policy issues, including school financing and charter schools, through dozens of state and local ballot measures.

But candidates aren't always giving clear indications of what they would do to improve the quality of American schools.

At the national level, the faltering economy and the crisis in the financial system have overwhelmed other concerns, even the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the biggest item of education business the next president is expected to face, the already-overdue NCLB reauthorization, the two major-party candidates have not been specific about such key questions as how they might change the law's accountability measures, improve the quality of its assessments, or finance it.

Aspirants for lower offices have typically followed the approach of Republican nominee John McCain and Democratic nominee Barack Obama, who have laid out fairly general plans that don't provide a comprehensive approach to fixing the problems of the NCLB law and other federal programs.

[← Back to Story](#)

"Through the deployment of HP MFPs with Edgeline Technology, I was able to reduce the purchase of nearly 100 LaserJet printers in three schools."

Mark Finstrom, Director of Technology Services
Highline Public Schools, Washington state



See for yourself »



Presidential Hopefuls Weigh In on Education: Side-by-Side Look at the Candidates' Education Positions

Voter's Guide McCAIN OBAMA on Education

Sen. John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, and Sen. Barack Obama, the Democratic nominee, take sharply contrasting views on a number of key education policy issues. [Read more about their different views here.](#)

“Down-ballot races seem to be taking their cues from the presidential race,” said Joseph Williams, the executive director of Democrats for Education Reform, a New York City-based political action committee that contributes money to Democratic candidates.



No Child Left Behind has become “politically confusing” and discussion of it has been so muddled that “it’s almost like damaged goods as an issue to raise,” said Mr. Williams, whose group is organizing fundraisers for Sen. Obama.

That situation makes it tough for candidates to say much about school improvement beyond “fix it and fund it,” Mr. Williams said. And the reticence on candidates’ part to bring up the NCLB law has made it tougher to talk about other education issues, such as differential pay for teachers, charter schools, and other forms of school choice, he said.

Still, the winners of next month’s elections will have to grapple with the NCLB law and a variety of other issues facing schools. Governors and state lawmakers, in particular, will have to find the money to sustain education programs even amid a looming economic downturn—or make difficult choices about where to cut.

“The issue of school finance is going to be important on the state and local level,” said Robert Costrell, a professor of education reform and economics at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, who worked for former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney’s campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. He is now backing Sen. McCain.

Teacher pensions, in particular, could be a politically volatile issue, Mr. Costrell suggested, since many states’ retirement funds have taken a hit during the turmoil in the financial markets. Shoring up those funds could provoke “potentially very interesting political tensions” between teachers and some voters who have seen substantial drops in their own retirement accounts, Mr. Costrell said.

See *Education Week’s* guide to the school-related **issues** facing voters as they go to the polls in November. The guide includes a **side-by-side comparison** of where Sen. McCain and Sen. Obama stand on important education issues that await the next president. It also highlights how education is playing in some **competitive races** for the U.S. Senate and the U. S. House of Representatives.

For a sampling of education choices in the 2008 **state contests**, the guide also offers capsule looks at the **governors’ races** in Washington state and North Carolina, the state **chief’s race** in Washington, and **gambling measures** in seven states that would raise or reapportion revenue for education.

State Ballot Measures

The top education-related items facing voters Nov. 4 include:

ALABAMA

Amendment 1—Allows the Alabama Trust Fund to re-establish the rainy-day Education Trust Fund for up to 6.5 percent of the general education budget—or \$435 million for this year—in case of a budget emergency.

ARKANSAS

Amendment 3—Authorizes lotteries to fund scholarships and grants for Arkansas residents in certain public and private nonprofit two- and four-year colleges and universities in the state.

COLORADO

Amendment 46—Prohibits “preferential treatment” to any individual or group based on race, sex, color,

ethnicity, or national origin in public employment, education, or contracting.

Amendment 49—Prohibits public-employee payroll deductions for purposes such as union dues or fees to other organizations.

Amendment 50—Expands gambling limits and funnels the resulting revenue into community colleges in the state.

Amendment 51—Raises sales taxes by 0.2 percent over two years and uses the money to pay for services for children and adults with developmental disabilities.

Amendment 54—Prohibits unions that contract with state or local government from contributing to a political party or candidate during the term of the contract and two years after, and prohibits contributors to ballot-issue campaigns from entering into certain government contracts relating to ballot issues.

Amendment 58—Increases taxes paid on oil and natural-gas companies and channels some of the increased revenue into college scholarships.

Amendment 59—Eliminates taxpayer rebates in the case of a revenue surplus and instead puts the money into pre-K-12 public education.

FLORIDA

Amendment 8—Clears the way for counties to levy optional local sales taxes, subject to voter approval, to supplement community college funding.

GEORGIA

Amendment 2—Authorizes the use of county, municipal, and school tax funds to pay for redevelopment programs, including repayment of tax-allocation bonds.

LOUISIANA

Amendment 1—Sets a three-term limit on members of the state school board and the boards governing state colleges and universities.

MAINE

Question 2—Allows a casino in Oxford County and dedicates 11 percent of the gross gambling income to college-tuition-finance programs, community colleges, and local schools.

MARYLAND

Question 2—Authorizes slot-machine gambling to help finance public education.

MASSACHUSETTS

Question 1—Eliminates the state's personal-income tax, starting in 2010, and cuts it to 2.65 percent from 5.3 percent as of Jan. 1, 2009.

MISSOURI

Proposition A—As part of a broader measure on gambling, increases the casino-gambling tax and uses the proceeds for a new elementary and secondary education improvement fund.

GAMBLING: Revenue for Schools

States with measures on the ballot:

Arkansas, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon

Why it's important: Voters in six of those seven states will be asked to expand gambling to pay for education programs, including general K-12 aid and college scholarships. Arkansas is considering adding a lottery, Maryland may legalize slot machines, Ohio and Maine may get their first commercial casinos, and Missouri and Colorado may expand existing casino hours and betting limits. Oregon voters face the opposite choice: A ballot initiative there would siphon some existing lottery revenues away from schools and put it into public safety.

MONTANA

I-155—Expands health coverage for uninsured children under the Children’s Health Insurance Program, the Montana Medicaid Program, and employer-sponsored health insurance.

NEBRASKA

Nebraska Civil Rights Initiative—Prohibits “preferential treatment” to any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in public education, employment, and contracting.

NEW MEXICO

Constitutional Amendment 1—Increases to nine members, from seven, the size of school boards in communities with populations greater than 200,000.

Constitutional Amendment 4—Allows school elections to be held at the same time as other nonpartisan elections.

OREGON

Measure 54—Repeals the section of the state constitution that requires voters in school board elections to be at least age 21, have lived in the school district for at least six months, and be able to read and write English.

Measure 58—Puts limits on the amount of time non-English-speaking public school students may be taught in a language that is not English.

Measure 60—Bases teacher pay raises on “classroom performance” and prohibits districts from giving raises based on seniority.

Measure 62—Redirects the way money from state lottery proceeds is distributed, pulling roughly \$200 million every two years from education funding to beef up law enforcement, criminal investigation, and forensics.

Measure 64—Prohibits payroll deductions from public employees for organizations, including unions, that support or oppose candidates, political parties, initiatives, or ballot measures.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Amendment 2—Allows investments in equities by trust funds set up to pay retirement benefits, such as health insurance, for state employees and teachers.

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures

Competitive Races

COLORADO

U.S. Senate Race

Former U.S. Rep. Bob Schaffer (R)

U.S. Rep. Mark Udall (D)

Why it’s important: Rep. Udall voted for the No Child Left

Behind Act in 2001, while Rep. Schaffer, a small-government conservative, voted against it. As a candidate for the seat being vacated by retiring Sen. Wayne Allard, a Republican, Mr. Schaffer says the

5 State Chiefs

INDIANA

Tony Bennett (R)
Richard D. Wood (D)

MONTANA

Elaine Sollie Herman (R)
Denise Juneau (D)

NORTH CAROLINA

June Atkinson (D)*
Richard Morgan (R)

NORTH DAKOTA**

Max Laird
Wayne G. Sanstead*

WASHINGTON**

Terry Bergeson*
Randy Dorn

**Incumbent*

***Nonpartisan ballot*

federal government should restore greater state and local control over schools. Rep. Udall would change the way states measure progress under the NCLB law, allowing schools to use multiple measures to demonstrate student learning.

MINNESOTA

U.S. Senate Race

Sen. Norm Coleman (R), incumbent

Al Franken (D), comedian and former writer for "Saturday Night Live"

Why it's important: Mr. Franken has been critical of the No Child Left Behind Act on the campaign trail, including during an appearance on "Late Night with David Letterman" in March. On his campaign Web site, he says the law must be "dramatically reformed or scrapped altogether," adding that "I'm for accountability, but I'm not for the deeply flawed NCLB system." Mr. Franken says schools should be allowed to measure student progress through methods other than standardized testing, such as portfolios. And he says skills such as critical thinking and creativity should be assessed, along with reading and mathematics. Sen. Coleman has co-sponsored a bill that would implement many of the recommendations of the Aspen Institute's Commission on No Child Left Behind, including calling for voluntary national standards and tests and state data systems to measure teacher effectiveness and student progress.

NORTH CAROLINA

U.S. House Race

Rep. Robin Hayes (R), incumbent

Larry Kissell (D), a high school teacher

Why it's important: Mr. Kissell, a social studies teacher at East Montgomery High School in Biscoe, came within 330 votes of ousting Rep. Hayes in 2006 in the state's 8th Congressional District. In this rematch, Mr. Kissell, a member of the National Education Association, is receiving help from his union. On his Web site, he calls the No Child Left Behind Act "a federal intrusion into [a] traditional area of state interest." On his congressional Web site, Rep. Hayes, who voted for the NCLB law in 2001, touts his work in helping to get North Carolina included in the U.S. Department of Education's growth-model pilot project, under which states are permitted to measure individual students' progress for accountability purposes, rather than comparing cohorts of students with one another. And Rep. Hayes is a co-sponsor of a bill that would significantly revise the law's accountability system, giving more flexibility to states and schools.

Governor's Races

NORTH CAROLINA

Pat McCrory (R)

Beverly Perdue (D)

Why it's important: One of three open-seat contests this year, the North Carolina governor's race pits Mr. McCrory, the mayor of Charlotte, against Lt. Gov. Perdue, for an office that Republicans hope they can wrest away from Democrats. Democratic Gov. Michael F. Easley is term-limited. Education—and, more specifically, Mr. McCrory's support of school vouchers and Ms. Perdue's opposition—has been the subject of debates and campaign television ads. Mr. McCrory also has called for merit pay for teachers, replacing outdated textbooks with laptops in middle and high school, and expanding vocational education. Ms. Perdue wants to establish college scholarships for low-income students, expand the state's teaching-fellows program as a recruitment tool, and expand prekindergarten.

WASHINGTON STATE

Christine Gregoire (D), incumbent

Dino Rossi (R)

Why it's important: This is a rematch from 2004, in which Gov. Gregoire eked out a victory by fewer than 200 votes. The state's controversial standardized test, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning—known as WASL—has been a campaign issue. Mr. Rossi, a businessman and former state senator, wants to replace it with what he says would be a more effective test. He also wants to allow school districts to pay math and science teachers higher salaries. Gov. Gregoire is a supporter of early education and has agreed to some modifications of WASL, including the phasing-out of the math portion of the high school exit exam. As governor, she has had to deal with slumping tax collections, but recently spared education from the 1 percent across-the-board cuts ordered in most state agencies.

State Chief's Race

WASHINGTON STATE

Superintendent of Schools (nonpartisan)

Terry Bergeson, incumbent

Randy Dorn

Why it's important: Of the five states with chief state school officer elections, this one is the most competitive. Ms. Bergeson, who recently unleashed strong criticism of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, is fighting off Mr. Dorn, a school employees' union official. Mr. Dorn has attacked his opponent for embracing the high-stakes nature of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning and for not obtaining more money for schools. Ms. Bergeson has defended her record and says students are making big improvements in reading and writing.

Vol. 28, Issue 09, Pages 24-27