



Message Guidance: Navigating the Political Environment on Education Issues

Background: Political Environment on Education Issues

Public education has become an increasingly high-profile political issue. As we saw in the 2022 and 2023 elections where the vast majority of pro-public education candidates won up and down the ballot, pro-public education candidates must be clear and firm about their values and proactively run on a positive, solutions-oriented vision for our public schools and students, which addresses the real challenges facing students, educators, parents, and schools.

As extensive opinion research has shown, parents and voters are focused on the real issues facing students and public schools, not the rightwing culture wars that some politicians have tried to elevate over the past months and years.

That is why pro-public education candidates should proactively communicate with parents and voters about strengthening public schools, addressing educator shortages, getting students the one-on-one attention they deserve, expanding school-based mental health services to support students, and keeping our students safe in the classroom.

In this memo, we offer both responsive and proactive message guidance to help neutralize false attacks and communicate a positive message about meeting the challenges facing our students.

Message Guidance:

Do: Lead with solutions: Parents and voters understand the biggest challenges facing America's students and our public schools are: 1) getting students the one-on-one support they need, 2) addressing educator shortages, 3) ensuring students have the mental health services they need, 3) focusing on students learning the real world skills they need to be successful in life, and 4) keeping students safe from gun violence in schools. They want candidates to address these issues, and when they do, they reject the politicians trying to bring political culture wars into schools.

Do: Directly respond before pivoting: Opinion research shows that right-wing attacks on public schools are only effective in a vacuum and that most parents and voters disagree with these extreme attacks, especially after they've heard a positive vision for education. It is most effective to directly respond to the attack in the manner laid out below, forcefully and with clear values, before pivoting to the actual, top-priority issues facing our students and the solutions that parents and voters are looking for.

Do: Be clear and specific about the right-wing radical agenda: Name specific books or subjects that they have sought to ban. It is incredibly powerful to cite how some want to stop students from learning about slavery, the Trail of Tears, and important figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Anne Frank, when that is spelled out clearly and explicitly.

Do: Remind people that parents and educators are united for student success: While some politicians try to drive a wedge between parents and educators, voters understand that parents and educators are united in their desire to see every student succeed. In every community across the nation, parents and

educators are working together to build stronger public schools and create opportunities for students. Research consistently shows that educators (teachers and education support professionals) are among the most trusted and respected people in every community.

Don't: Use their terms: Avoid repeating or using terms like “critical race theory,” “CRT,” or “grooming” which have been co-opted and distorted by the far-right as catch-all, culture war dog whistles. Don't try to debate what CRT is or is not or whether it is or is not taught in K-12 schools. Instead of debating the terms, say what you are for and against plainly and clearly, without jargon.

Don't: Be afraid of this debate: While there is no need to directly debate or elevate the political operatives or astroturf groups pushing the right-wing culture wars, extensive opinion research has shown that the way pro-public education candidates can lose this debate is by ignoring it. The right-wing talking points on these issues only work in a vacuum. For parents and voters, silence on education issues is taken as indifference to students' well-being and future. That is why pro-public education candidates should proactively lay out their vision on education, and – if attacked – directly and forcefully respond before pivoting to the solutions for the real issues facing public schools.

Key Talking Points:

Positive Top Line:

- Most of us want the same thing – strong, quality, welcoming public schools that give every student the freedom to reach their potential. All students - Black and white, Native and newcomer, Hispanic and Asian from rural, suburban and urban communities alike – should have the opportunity to learn and succeed.
- In every community across [America/State], parents and educators are coming together to support students and schools. Their goal is to make sure that our schools have the necessary resources and staff to provide students with safe, healthy environments and the individualized attention that they need.
- [Candidate name] is focused on getting all students the support they need to thrive.
 - o [He/She/They] are partnering with parents and educators to expand learning opportunities for students,
 - o Ensuring that students have access to the mental health supports they need and are learning the real-world skills they need to be successful, and
 - o Addressing educator shortages by demanding that there are enough talented and dedicated staff in schools so that students have the support that they need to learn and thrive.
- [Candidate name] knows that there are too many mass shootings in our schools, which is why [He/She/They] prioritize the safety of students and [are/is] working to keep weapons of war out of our schools and off our streets.
- And [Candidate name] knows that our public school educators are some of the most trusted and respected people in every community. [He/She/They] knows that to attract and retain the best teachers and education support professionals to support students, we need to pay our educators like the professionals they are and give them the respect they deserve.

- [He/She/They] trust parents and educators to work together to make education decisions rather than politicians who have never set foot in a classroom and who mandate one-size-fits-all approaches.
- [He/She/They] are working to strengthen our public schools to ensure our students are learning the skills they need to be successful in their careers, college, and lives. That means expanding instruction in practical skills and technical training. And it means investing in our community colleges and higher education institutions to ensure all students can learn the skills they need to enter the career field of their dreams.

Contrast Top Line:

- As Americans, most of us want the same thing – strong public schools that give every student the freedom to reach their potential. All students - Black and white, Native and newcomer, Hispanic and Asian, rural, suburban and urban alike – should have the opportunity to succeed.
- Sadly, rather than working to strengthen our public schools or helping educators and parents get our students the support they need, [Opponent name/”some power-hungry politicians”] is/are attacking our public schools, taking away opportunities for students to learn, and even trying to discriminate against some children in our community.
- We won’t let a handful of extremist politicians divide and distract us from what our students need to reach their full potential: an inspiring and age-appropriate curriculum that prepares each and every one of them for their future.
- [He/she/they] ignore the needs of students, parents, and educators and instead try to distract voters by dragging right-wing culture wars into our community’s classrooms, just when our students need our support the most.
- [He/She/They] are using our most vulnerable students as political pawns and attacking our educators as they try to privatize our public schools.
 - o Rather than working to keep our students and educators safe, [he/she/they] have fought to ban books about MLK and the Holocaust and whitewash our history,
 - o Rather than keeping weapons of war out of our classrooms and off our streets, [he/she/they] are driving passionate educators out of the profession, and
 - o Rather than working to solve the educator shortages, [he/she/they] are attacking LGBTQ+ students and educators.
- Students, parents, and educators deserve better. They need partners, not partisans. They need solutions, not strife.

Response to Right-wing Attacks:

- There are some things every student should learn about, like the Trail of Tears, slavery, and important figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Anne Frank.
- Our children deserve to learn accurate, age-appropriate lessons about America, from our greatest triumphs to our darkest moments. That includes slavery and how racism affects us today.
- Parents and educators agree that all our students deserve to learn the good and the bad about our history so we can learn from the past and come together for a better future. Students miss out when we allow politicians like [opponent’s name] to whitewash our history.

- Instead of addressing the real issues our students and schools are facing, [opponent name/"some politicians"] is pushing their extreme political agenda into our public schools.
- [Opponent name/"some politicians"] wants to ban books and punish teachers, allowing them to be sued or fined, just for doing their job.
- Unlike some politicians, [candidate name] has listened to parents and educators, and understands the real issues that our students are facing. [He/She/They] knows that our local public schools work best when parents and teachers come together to collaborate on what children need.
- That is why [Candidate name] is focused on getting all students the support they need to thrive. [He/She/They] has partnered with parents and educators to expand learning opportunities for students. [Candidate name] is working to help solve the educator shortages with full-time, passionate teachers and education support professionals, while also expanding mental health support for students. This will help make sure that every student can have the individualized attention that they need to learn and thrive in school.

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