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Who's for Public Education?

Give Kids Good Schools **Guide to Elected Officials and Candidates**

Many officials claim to be "the education candidate", and it can 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?

4. What changes or improvements would I like to see?

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? 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

■ Be knowledgeable of school reform and strategies to improve public schools

■ 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?

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Facts: 48 million students attend K-12 public schools in the United States.[1] 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?

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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 school quality?

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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.

High Expectations for Every Student

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

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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.[2] Even with some improvement, proficiency scores are low. Just 31% of fourth graders score proficient or better in reading, 36% score proficient or better in math. Among eighth graders, 31% were proficient or better in reading and 30% in math.[3] Among 12th graders, 36% were at or above proficient in reading and 17% in mathematics.[4]

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

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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

Facts continued to next page

- 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 home-work 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?

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Facts: Research suggests that nearly three out of every 10 public high school students fail to graduate, and close to half of all African-American (44%) and Hispanic students (48%) leave high school without a diploma.[5]

Parent and Community Support

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

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Facts: 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.

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

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Facts: 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?**

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Facts: 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; and advanced analytic and reasoning skills. The minimums recommended by the National Commission on Excellence in Education were four English, three Social Studies, three Science, three Math, and two Foreign Language courses. To date, 24 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 performance?

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Facts: There is no single "best way" to evaluate school and student performance. In fact, research shows that multiple methods are best. These can include standardized tests that compare students to others nationally (norm-based tests) and measure students' ability to complete specific criteria (criterion-based tests), essay tests, assessment of student work (portfolio assessment), completion of projects, presentations and course grades and tests. A broad picture of school performance can be found by measuring student performance to a set standard and measuring student progress over time (value-added).

3. What is your position on NCLB?

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Facts: 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?**

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Facts: Research shows that quality early-learning programs and quality afterschool programs have a positive impact on student success. A 2006 RAND report found that every additional dollar spent on preschool in California would reap $2.62 in returns. A longitudinal study of almost 1,000 low-income minority children who participated in Chicago Child-Parent Centers found higher reading scores, less frequent retention, lower assignment to special education, lower 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?**

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Facts: In the 2002-2003 school year, U.S. public schools spent an average $8,044 per student. However, because more than 90% of school funding comes from state and local sources, per-student spending varies widely among states. For example, in the 2002-2003 school year, public schools in Utah spent an average $4,838 per student, while public schools in New Jersey spent an average $12,568 per student. 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?

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Facts: 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?

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Facts: 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, one in four public schools (enrolling a total of 11 million students) reported that at least one of its buildings was in less than adequate condition.[6]

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

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Facts: 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 2003, five percent of students ages 12-18 reported being victimized at school, 13% of 9th-12th graders reported being in a physical fight on school property, and six percent reported they had carried a weapon on school property.

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

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Facts: Research on the effects of afterschool programs is mixed. Some research suggests that youth in quality afterschool and out-of-school programs do better in school, are less likely to use drugs and alcohol, and are less likely to drop out of high school. Nearly 90% of Americans believe afterschool programs can make valuable contributions to students' learning.[7]

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

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Facts: In 2000, 52% of teachers held a bachelor's degree, 42% held a master's degree, and five percent held a specialists' degree. In the 2004-2005 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, principals and teachers suggested year-long internships and mentoring (assigning experienced teachers to mentor new teachers) as two examples of training that could be helpful to them.

Schools and Classrooms Equipped for Teaching and Learning

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

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Facts: In the 2002-03 school year, U.S. public schools spent an average $8,044 per student. Combined, U.S. public schools spent more than $11 billion dollars on instructional materials, including textbooks.[8]

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

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Facts: In fall 2003, nearly 100% of public schools and 93% of classrooms had access to the Internet and 95% of schools had a broadband connection. While 82% of these schools trained at least some of their teachers, in a majority of schools less than half of the teachers had been trained.[9] Currently, only a handful of schools incorporate technology into project-based lessons.

Qualified Teachers in Every Classroom

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

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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 percentage point difference on the standardized test scores of students who have been taught by high-quality teachers for three years, compared to those taught by low-quality teachers.[10]

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

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Facts: As outlined by the federal _No Child Left Behind Act_ (NCLB), to be deemed highly qualified, teachers must have: 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach.[11] High school and middle school teachers can prove they know the subject through a college major (or equivalent number of courses) or a 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 highly qualified teachers?

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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.[12] 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.[13]

Strong School Leadership

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

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Facts: 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?**

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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.)

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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. 93% of superintendents and 88% of principals say they experienced on "enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources to fulfill them.[14]

[1] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

[2] NAEP 2000-2005.

[3] National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005.

[4] National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000.

[5] Greene, Jay and Winters, Marcus, _Public High School Graduation and College. Readiness Rates_: 1991-2002, Education Working Paper No. 8, NY: Center for Civic Innovation, Manhattan Institute, February 2005.

[6] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Condition of America's Public School Facilities: 1999. NCES 2000-032, by Laurie Lewis, Kyle Snow, Elizabeth Farris, Becky Smerdon, Stephanie Cronen, and Jessica Kaplan. Bernie Greene, project officer. Washington, DC: 2000.

[7] National League of Cities (2005) _Afterschool Hours: A New Focus for America's Cities_

[8] NCES (2005) Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education School Year 2002-03.

[9] NCES (2005). Internet Access in U.S. Public Schools and Classrooms: 1994–2003

[10] Sanders & Rivers, 1996.

[11] U.S. Department of Education. _New No Child Left Behind Flexibility: Highly Qualified Teachers_ Fact Sheet: March 2004.

[12] William J. Hussar (1999). Predicting the Need for Newly Hired Teachers in the U.S. to 2008–09. US Department of Education, NCES.

[13] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). _The Condition of Education_ 2005.

[14] Public Agenda, _Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game_, 2001; and _Rolling Up Their Sleeves_, 2003.