

THE RISE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION



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The 2018 mid-term elections witnessed a host of firsts, including 40 educators running for state office in Kentucky. Fed up with low wages, shrinking budgets, and policymakers who are calling the shots, current and former educators lined up to run for state office. Although many fell short winning their respective races, a possible blueprint has emerged for educators in other states, including Indiana, to emulate.

A very strong and positive sentiment is rising among American voters regarding public education. Valerie Strauss, in her article for the *Washington Post* titled “Americans express support for traditional public schools in a new poll, even as Trump disparages them,” reviews the latest PDK poll of public attitudes towards public education. The poll shows there is increased support for public schools “at a time when Trump and DeVos have pushed alternatives . . .” Moreover, 62% of the parents polled gave their public school a letter grade of an A or B compared to 45 percent of nonparents. Strauss goes on to report that there is a growing sentiment from those polled that legislators, who are calling the shots, are out of step with parents main concern: Parents “want their children prepared for life and career after they complete high school” rather than preparing them for high stakes tests and spending public money on vouchers.

Public Education is on the rise. The 2018 mid-term elections show the start of a movement that every public education supporter can look at with some optimism. However, much more needs to be done to ensure more educators and supporters of public education are elected. Lessons can be learned from the examples cited.

KENTUCKY EDUCATORS TAKE ON POLITICS

Across America, a wave of support is growing for educators. This is very apparent in Kentucky. In the 2018 mid-term elections held on November 6, 2018, 51 active and retired educators ran for state office. While the election results were mixed, a statement was made to Kentucky legislators that they cannot continue to cut public school funding which adversely impacts teachers’ pay and benefits. As reported by Tom Loftus for the *Louisville Courier Journal*, educators who were fed up with non-educators making educational decisions that adversely impact public education took a stand by running for office. Quoting Max Morley, a seventh-grade social studies teacher, Loftus writes “A lot of teachers and support staff at schools are fed up, and they’re just standing up and saying ‘we’re not going to beg you to listen to our voice because that’s clearly not working. We’re going to be the voice.’”

Although the results were less than desirable, still 14 educators won their respective races. According to a report by Mandy McLaren for the *Louisville Courier Journal*, several educators ousted incumbents. McLaren indicates, “In total, 37 educators lost their races.” Twenty-nine of the teacher candidates who lost were Democrats, an outcome in line with the rest of the night’s results . . .” The results might have improved if more Republican public school educators had run for office. This is something that will need to be studied as others consider this strategy for upcoming elections.

IS THIS A NATIONAL TREND?

According to a report by Alexia Campbell for *Vox*, more than 1,000 teachers were on the ballot during the 2018 mid-term election. She reports, “While most teacher candidates on the ballot are Democrats, a fair share are Republicans (1,022 Democrats versus 433 Republicans in state legislative races, according to the NEA). Republican teachers first flexed their political clout during the primary season, unseating more than a dozen Republican lawmakers who had cut taxes, gutted funding for public schools and rolled back benefits for teachers.”

Maria Durand, reporter for ABC News, cites a recent poll indicating Americans like public schools. The poll, conducted by Gallup and Phi Delta Kappa, surveyed more than 1,000 people. Specifically “three-quarters of those polled say they prefer improving the public system, compared to 22 percent who said they would like to see vouchers to use public money for private school.” Durand goes on to report that those polled cite a lack of financial support as the biggest issue facing public schools.

As reported by Madeline Will and Sarah Schwartz for *Education Week*, scores of teachers were elected to state office. In Oklahoma alone, 66 teachers ran for state office. Even though only 6 ended up winning their respective races, there is hope rising among educators that the tide is turning. One of the bright spots was in the Connecticut general election. “Most notably, in Connecticut, Jahana Hayes, the 2016 National Teacher of the Year, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. And onlookers say that even though most teachers didn’t win their races, the door is open for continued political engagement.”

Of particular interest is the race for Arizona superintendent of public instruction. Kathy Hoffman, a special education teacher, is a first-time candidate. She ran against Fred Riggs who is a veteran politician. According to a report by the Laura Segall who cites the *Associated Press*, Hoffman, like many of Arizona teachers were

fed up with non-educators making educational decisions. She is quoted as saying “career politicians and political insiders don’t necessarily make the best candidates.” This is especially true when it comes to making decisions about public education. Hoffman’s message resonated with Arizona voters. She beat a highly skilled Republican politician in a state where few Democrats win.

SENTIMENT GROWING FOR UNDERPAID EDUCATORS

Madeline Will, reporter for *Education Week*, reports that there is growing support for increasing teacher salaries citing the results of a 2018 survey. She reports, “When respondents were informed of how much teachers earn, they tended to be more supportive of increasing teacher salaries. Among this segment of respondents, about two-thirds said teachers should get a pay raise.”

Americans are overwhelmingly in favor of increasing teacher pay according to the results of a national poll. As reported by PBS, the results of a new poll from the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research show that “Nearly 9 in 10 Democrats, 78 percent of independents and 66 percent of Republicans think teacher salaries are too low.” The poll goes on to show that more than half of Americans approve of teachers striking for more pay.

In the Indiana House of Representatives District 26 race, two messages emerged from the candidates who were running for that office. Democratic challenger Chris Campbell’s message to voters was about fully funding public schools and paying teachers more. Her opponent, Sally Seigrist, used the Republican message that Indiana has increased funding for public schools but only 57% of expenditures go to the classroom. While the numbers may be accurate, many realize that one reason only 57% of the money goes to the classroom is because of the other costs associated with running a school including custodial, maintenance, guidance counselors, principals, assistant principals and secretaries. District 26 voters elected Chris Campbell as their new representative. As Dave Bangert reported for the *Journal Courier*, “Campbell campaigned heavily on promises to support public schools . . .” Although she is not a public school educator, Campbell’s message of fully funding public schools resonated with District 26 voters.

THE RISE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

There’s a new sentiment occurring within America: there is growing support for teachers and public education. As reported by Molly Ball, anger over education funding is changing the political map. She writes, “The activism that started with this spring’s sudden wave of teacher strikes and walkouts didn’t ebb when picket lines did. It got channeled into political action.” She goes on to say that this dynamic is happening across the country with more to come.

From Kentucky to Arizona, and throughout the nation, teachers, public school supporters, parents, and voters are turning their attention to a public education system that has been dramatically harmed by policymakers. Whether its teacher pay, school facilities or the abuse of standardized testing, American voters are starting to realize that the path that many state legislators have forged is decreasing the teacher talent pool, suppressing teacher compensation and harming America’s future. As reported by Anya Kamenetz, reporter for NPR, 11 states had important political races that would impact each state’s respective public education system. She quotes Rep. Mandela Barnes as saying on election night, “We’re bringing education back to the state of Wisconsin.” Wisconsin is where the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony

Evers, defeated Governor Scott Walker. Walker’s agenda for weakening public education by cutting K12 and higher education budgets was a major focus of the race.

IS INDIANA NEXT?

Throughout the nation, a wave of educators and public school supporters started a political movement. Many educators have determined that the only way to save and fully fund public education is by winning political races. Although it is illegal for teachers in Indiana to strike, there are still many ways in which they, as well as all public education supporters, can move education decision making away from the statehouse and back to the schoolhouse. A blueprint is being forged across America. Educators and public education supporters need to consider running for office. The more public education supporters are elected, the better off Indiana’s public education will be.

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Source: NORC Center for Public
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SUMMARY

The current educational reforms being used by Indiana policymakers are based on competition, using standardized tests to evaluate teachers and using a school-choice model that diverts public funds to charter and private schools. The National Center on Education and Economy indicates that the problem we face in public education is caused by the political system, not by the educators. “We have built a bureaucracy in our schools in which, apart from the superintendent of schools, the people who have the responsibility do not have the power, and the people who have the power do not have the responsibility” (p. XXVI). Policymakers craft and pass educational legislation. Then, they direct school boards and administrators to implement their legislation. When their legislation doesn’t work, school boards, educators and administrators are generally blamed for the failure.

If Indiana is to have a competitive education system compared with the world’s best education systems, then the influence of political agendas must be removed from the equation. This does not mean that politics will never play a role in supporting the education system. What it does mean is policymakers must allow a public education system that empowers local school boards, administrators and educators to make educational decisions for their respective communities. When this type of governance is truly embedded within Indiana’s public education system, then and only then will true education reform begin to work because those working closest with the students, educators, are making the educational decisions and not some political or special interest group hundreds of miles away from the classroom.

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In order for Indiana to become competitive with the world’s best education systems, educational reforms that include early childhood education, equitable education opportunities for all students, raising requirements for entrance into the teaching profession and improving teachers salaries comparable with other professions must be considered. Also, the issue of poverty must be addressed. True education reform will focus on ensuring all children, regardless of their socio-economical background, will have equal access to the resources they need to be successful in school. Educators and public school supporters who support these reforms should either hold their respective policymakers accountable or consider running for office to replace them. With the rise of support growing for public education throughout the nation, the time is now to make this happen in Indiana.

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