Republican Governors Running on Strong Education Records as Candidates for President

Romney and Pawlenty earn high marks for student achievement, Perry can spotlight Hispanic performance

CAMBRIDGE, MA – The three most talked-about governors running for president in 2012 – (former governors) Mitt Romney and Tim Pawlenty, and (perhaps a current governor) Rick Perry – come from states that outperform the U.S. average on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress tests. Romney takes top honors for overall student performance in Massachusetts, and Perry can hail the outstanding achievement of Texas Hispanic students.

In an analysis of the leading Republican contenders in the presidential race, Allison Sherry writes, “In staking out platforms in the coming months for what will likely be a feisty GOP primary, Republicans face two quandaries regarding education policy.” They need to distinguish their positions from Obama’s “centrist education reforms” and “to win over a Republican base that resists a growing federal role in education.” Her article, “The 2012 Republican Candidates (So Far): What they’ve said and done on education in the past, and what they might do about our public schools if elected” will appear in the Fall 2011 issue of Education Next and is currently available at www.educationnext.org.

Sherry notes that as governor, “Romney proposed education reform measures that lifted the state cap on charter schools and gave principals more power to get rid of ineffective teachers.” Statewide graduation requirement tests were started during his first year as governor in 2003. In his third year as governor, 4th and 8th graders scored first in the country in math and English.

In his eight years as Minnesota’s governor, Tim Pawlenty’s “push against the teachers union grew stronger,” Sherry writes, and he called for tying teacher pay to performance, bringing up the state’s standards, and urging state lawmakers to authorize the use of a transparent growth model to see how well schools are really doing to improve student achievement. Sherry describes Pawlenty’s approach to unions: “I’ll try to work with you. That is until you don’t work with me.”

Assuming he runs, Texas Governor Rick Perry is “likely to use his own state’s successes to argue that the federal government should dramatically downsize in education,” Sherry says. He’ll likely call for the repeal of No Child Left Behind, and let states take charge of their education systems. Test scores among students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are higher in Texas than in Wisconsin, for example, which has fewer students qualifying for free- and reduced-price lunch.
Other leading Republican candidates profiled include Michele Bachmann and Newt Gingrich. Sherry notes, “Under a Bachmann presidency, expect the U.S. Department of Education to be all but shuttered” and a push for No Child Left Behind to be repealed. Newt Gingrich’s views have developed through the years, she observes, and include his call for the abolition of the U.S. Department of Education in the 1990s and his push in the 2000s for improvements in math and science education.

Sherry concludes her analysis of the Republican candidates by saying, “What they all have in common is a belief that education needs deep reform that goes beyond anything Democrats have proposed.”

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