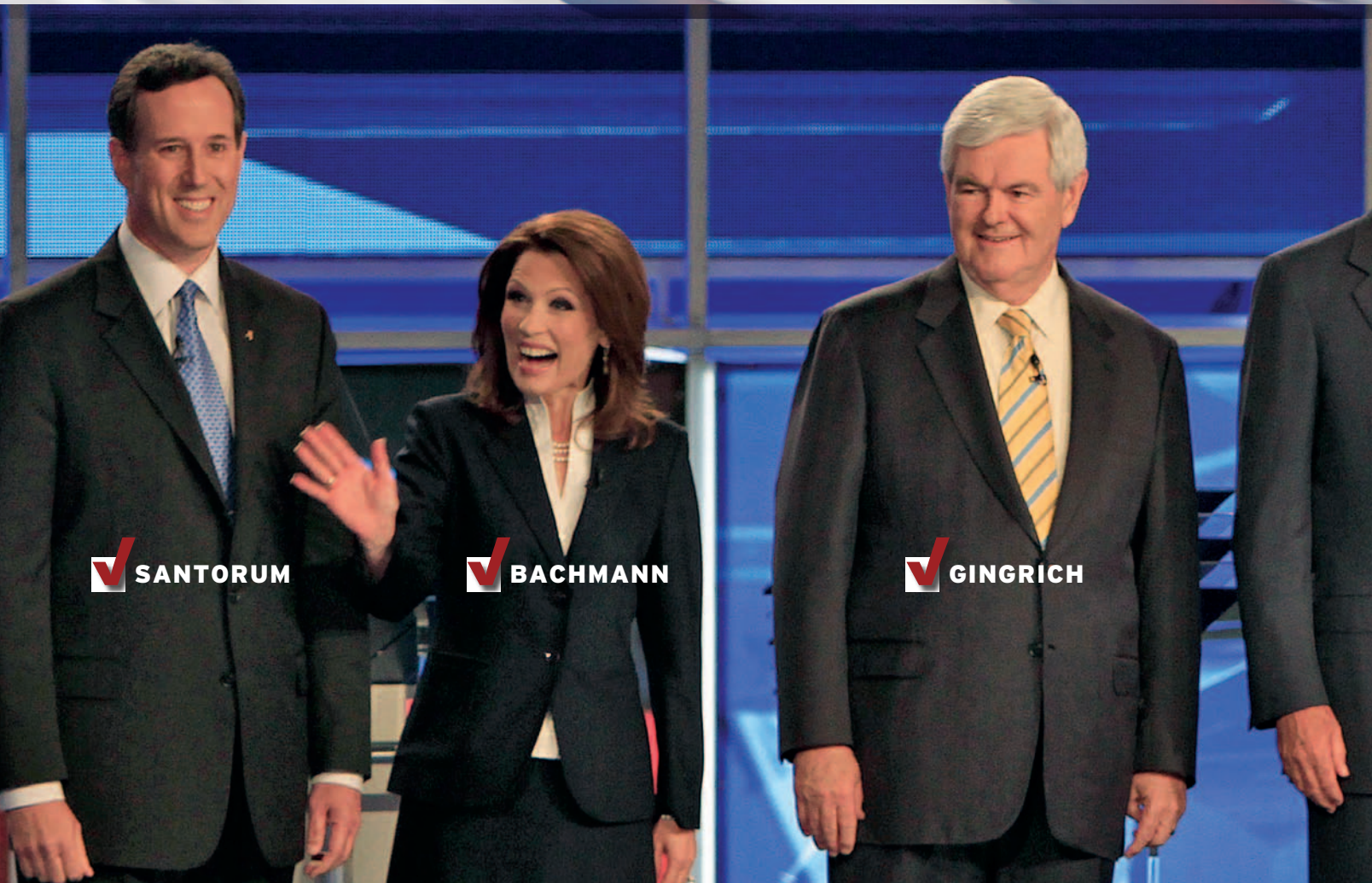


# The 2012 Republican



✓ SANTORUM

✓ BACHMANN

✓ GINGRICH

PHOTOGRAPHY / AP IMAGES

**T**wo months before his 2008 election, Barack Obama addressed a roomful of Ohio public school teachers, praising their long hours and talking about his daughters' starting 2nd and 5th grade. It was a typical Democratic education speech, with vows of support for early childhood education, for building up programs that help students from "the day they're born until the day they graduate from college."

Then Obama departed from the usual feel-good talking points. He touted competition, charter schools, and school

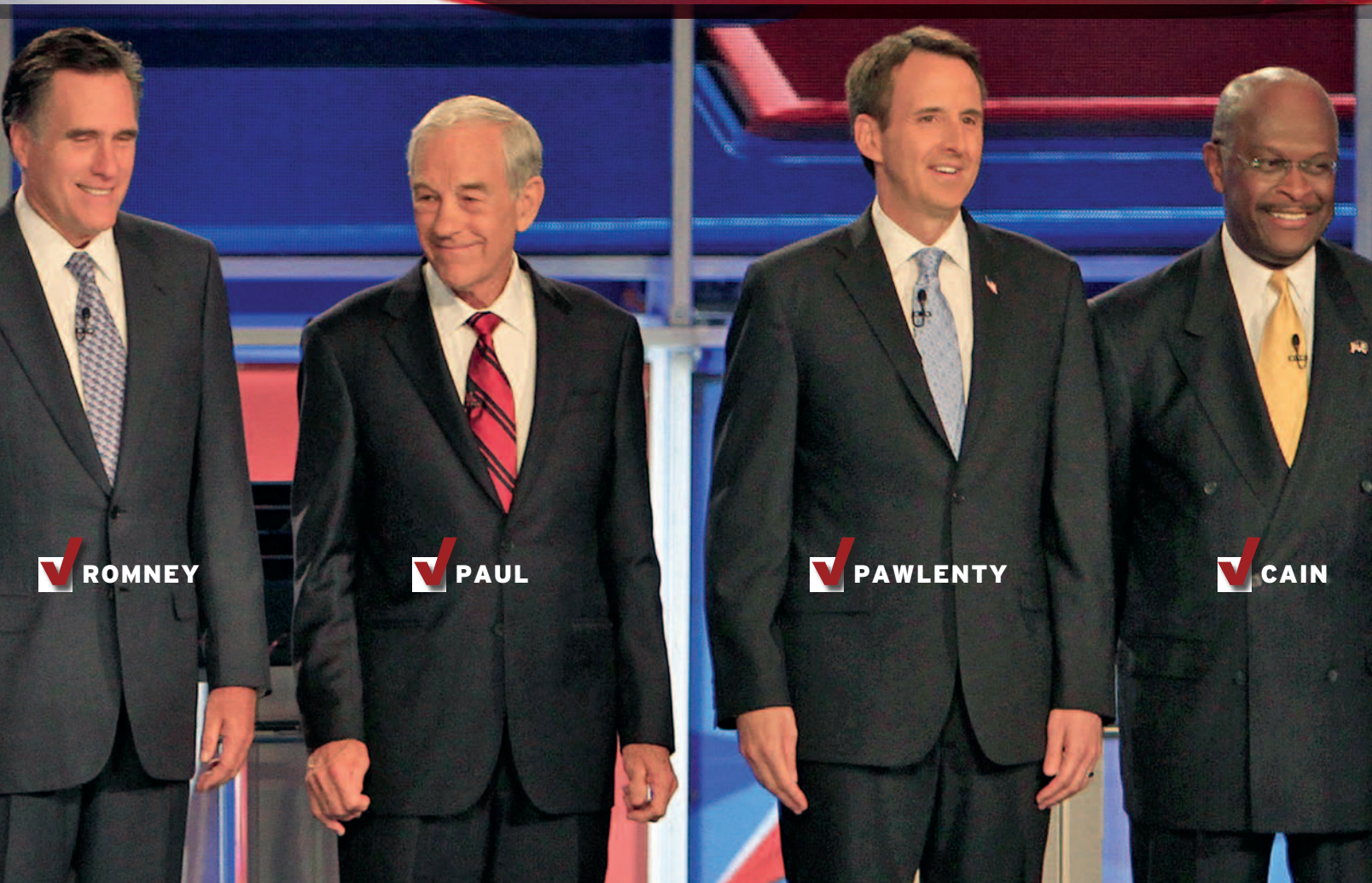
choice. "I believe in public schools, but I also believe in fostering competition within the public schools," he said. "And that's why, as president, I'll double the funding for responsible charter schools."

That wasn't an applause line, for sure, but it did serve another purpose: to position the candidate as a different kind of Democrat, one willing to embrace ideas from across the aisle and push back against his own teachers union base. It also put Republicans on notice: Obama

## What they've said and done on education in the past, and what



# Candidates (So Far)



✓ ROMNEY

✓ PAUL

✓ PAWLENTY

✓ CAIN

wouldn't be bashful about encroaching on their territory on education.

Two and a half years later, Republicans are still trying to figure out how to respond to Obama, a Democratic president with education reform bona fides. To date, the most prominent leaders of the GOP have either been mute on the topic of education or heaped praise on the president. Indiana governor Mitch Daniels lauded the Obama administration and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in a speech he made

in April 2011: "We need to prepare our young people with the highest possible preparation wherever they come from, wherever they are headed," he said. "[Duncan] is the nation's champion, along with the president he serves, of that ideal."

As the winter primaries get closer, don't expect much more of that.

## The One That Got Away

Republicans began this election season in search of a candidate

**they might do about our public schools if elected** By ALLISON SHERRY



and a message. The May withdrawal of Mitch Daniels from the Republican primary race left the GOP without one of its most visible education leaders. The Midwestern governor had become a darling among education reformers for making school choice and quality teaching his top priorities.

In his final State of the State speech in Indianapolis, Daniels said that if he did nothing else in 2011, he wanted to “hitch his legacy” to education reform. Watching from the audience that day were students on waiting lists to get into various charter schools. He urged state lawmakers to create a voucher program that would allow kids to use public dollars for private school tuition. He talked for 30 minutes about improving teacher quality. And by the end of the legislative session, he got just about everything he wanted in a school reform plan: expansion of charter schools, private school vouchers, and college scholarships for students who graduate high school early.

But after flirting with a presidential run, Daniels bowed out, leaving to those still in the running the task of building a GOP education platform.

## The Race Is On

After a slow start, the Republican field is finally starting to take shape. Former governors Mitt Romney and Tim Pawlenty have announced their election bids, and former GOP house speaker Newt Gingrich is also running. As of June 2011, Representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota and former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum had entered the race. Republicans await announcements from Sarah Palin and Texas governor Rick Perry.

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 they need to win over the Republican base, fueled by some Tea Party energy, that will push for the U.S. Department of Education to be dismantled altogether.

Former education secretary Margaret Spellings says gaining ground may not be easy, but it has been done before: by George W. Bush, her former boss.

“I commend President Obama for adopting the GOP playbook and building on the groundwork that we’ve laid,” said Spellings, currently a consultant in Washington, D.C. “It’s time for us to develop some new material that pushes even further.”

If Republicans want an advantage, Spellings argues, they need to push choice and the hold-schools-accountable platform because “that’s safe territory for Republicans of all stripes,” she said. “Unite Republicans by talking about the kind of public policy that ties very closely to accountability.”

One likely Republican target is school spending. Days after entering office, President Obama signed into law the



sweeping stimulus bill, which included a \$100 billion bailout of the K–12 system. A year later, the smaller “edujobs” bill pumped another \$10 billion into the schools. While this money was ostensibly linked to reform via the Race to the Top, there’s very little to show for this huge influx of federal funds. Most studies show that it merely saved

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teachers' jobs, or kicked layoffs down the road a year or two. In lots of places where layoffs were not on the table, it allowed school districts to give teachers raises, at a time when America suffered through the worst unemployment crisis in a generation.

By pointing at the fat in the education system, GOP candidates could argue, as Governor Pawlenty did in 2007, that American schools are "costing us a lot of money and it's costing them their future."

Expect to see the candidates applaud governors in New Jersey, Wisconsin, and Ohio, who took on collective bargaining rights



and insisted that money is best used to reward good teaching for the children's sake.

"We have built a system...that cares more about the feelings of adults than the future of children," said New Jersey Republican governor Chris Christie, widely expected to run for president in 2016, at the American Enterprise Institute earlier this year. "Tell me, where else is there a profession with no reward for excellence and no penalty for failure?"

In a 2011 speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference, Romney berated Obama for failed economic policies, saying afterward that he's "seen the failure of liberal answers before...liberal education policies fail our children today because they put pensions and privileges for the union bosses above our kids."

## Defining the Federal Role

A candidate like Romney or Pawlenty is still going to have to explain to the Republican base why they're not going to shutter the U.S. Department of Education. During the 2010 midterm elections, Tea Party Senate and House candidates across the country promised on the campaign trail that they would shut down the U.S. Department of Education and hand control over to state governments. Many of them are now members of Congress.

A related issue is where to land on the "Common Core" standards, a set of expectations in reading and math developed

by the nation's governors and state superintendents, but viewed by many conservatives as a federal plot to take over the schools.

"Post-Obamacare, post-Dodd-Frank, in the Tea Party world, Republicans aren't interested anymore in a robust federal role in education," said a senior GOP Capitol Hill staffer, who could not be named because he is not authorized to talk to the media. "Bush liked it and talked about it, fine. Now that he's not there hitting us over the head with it, we'll move to empower and trust state and local officials to make decisions."

## The Candidates

No matter who else enters the race, it is unlikely a newcomer will have a ready-made education platform. Romney, Bachmann, Pawlenty, Perry, and Gingrich have all, in their careers, been outspoken on key issues of education policy. It's worth considering what each of these (potential) candidates might do, were he or she to become the nation's 45th president.

MITT ROMNEY, like many Republican leaders in the 1990s, called for abolishing the U.S. Department of Education.

Once he became governor of Massachusetts, Romney plotted out a more sophisticated education platform. He pushed school choice when a Democratic-controlled state legislature was moving away from it, and extolled the virtues of No Child Left Behind.

"I've taken a position where, once upon a time, I said I wanted to eliminate the Department of Education.... That's very popular with the base," Romney said at a 2007 Republican debate in South Carolina. "As I've been a governor and seen the impact that the federal government can have holding down the interest of the teachers unions and instead putting the interests of the kids and the parents and the teachers first, I see that the Department of Education can actually make a difference."

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.

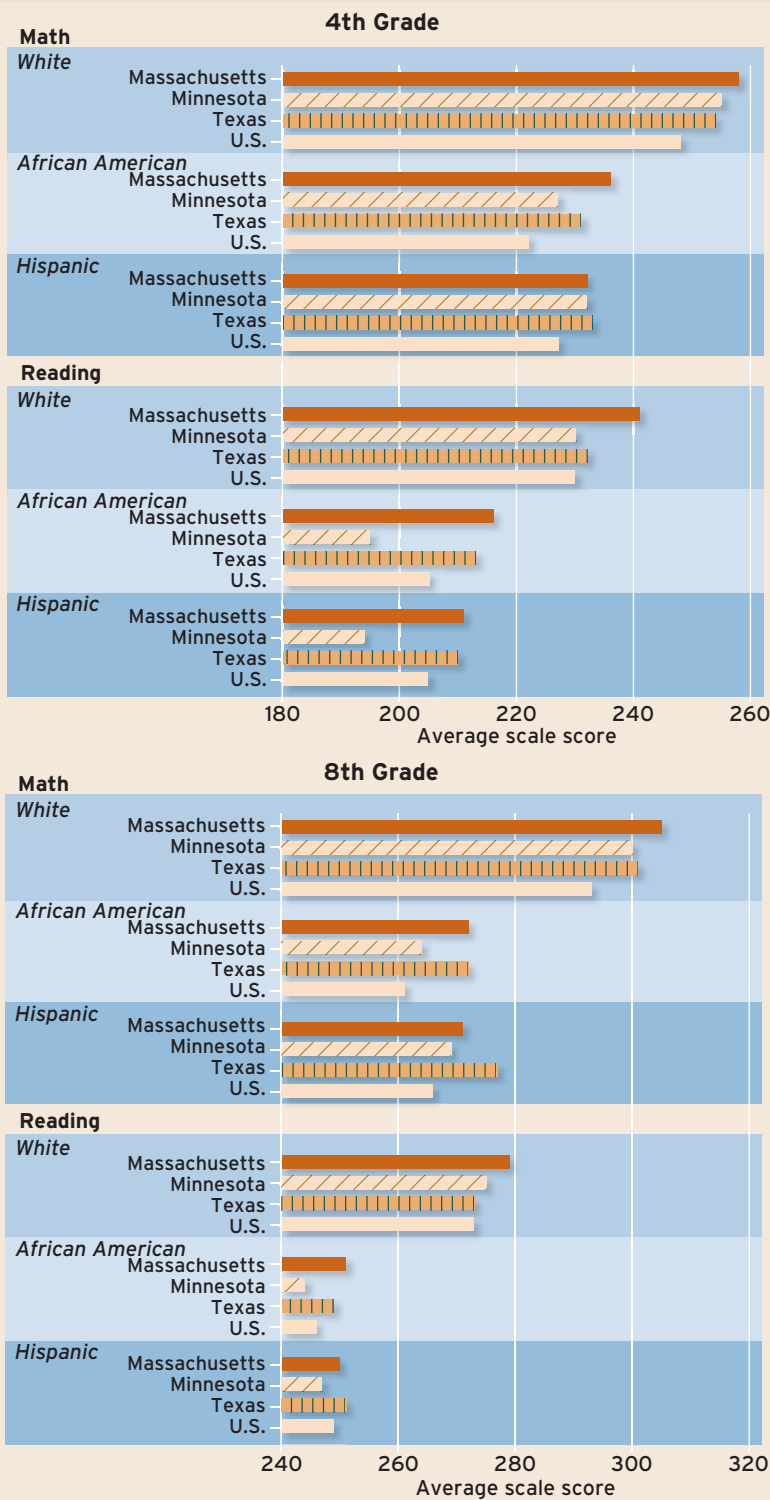
In his book *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness*, he darkly warns about American students' low achievement in reading and writing. He writes that money does not play a pivotal role in education quality and achievement, perhaps a harbinger that Romney's education-reform platform wouldn't include new money, as Obama's plan did.

"The average amount spent per pupil, adjusted for inflation, rose by 73 percent between 1980 and 2005, and the average class size was reduced by 18 percent," he wrote. "But during that same period, the educational performance of our children has hardly budged. Why not?"

In Massachusetts, Romney defended statewide graduation requirement tests, which started during his first year as governor in 2003. When one mayor declared he would

## Governors Have a Right to Brag (Figure 1)

The three most talked-about (former and current) governors in the race—Romney, Pawlenty, and (perhaps) Perry—all come from states that outperform the U.S. average. Romney takes top honors overall, but Perry can claim credit for strong results among Hispanics.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2009.

dole out diplomas even to students who didn't pass the tests, Romney threatened to withhold state dollars.

He also defended English immersion after visiting a Boston school where many students enrolled in bilingual classes had actually been born in the United States.

If Romney talks education in the next year, he will blend the importance of accountability and of governing with a stick if needed. He is widely credited for raising test scores. In his third year as governor, 4th and 8th graders scored first in the country in math and English (see Figure 1).

It was in education that MICHELE BACHMANN got her political sea legs. Disappointed in the school work brought home by her foster kids attending public school, the now Minnesota congresswoman decided to get involved because the school system didn't have an "academic foundation," according to *Bloomberg News*.

She started a charter school in the early 1990s, but abruptly resigned from its board—along with other board members—after the school district accused the charter of teaching religion in its classrooms.

In 1999, Bachmann ran for Stillwater school board with a platform to dump Minnesota's "Profile of Learning," the state's graduation standards. It is the only race the three-term congresswoman has ever lost.

Under a Bachmann presidency, expect the U.S. Department of Education to be all but shuttered. In 2004, she authored legislation that would remove Minnesota from the requirements of No Child Left Behind. (It didn't pass.) In a 2009 letter to constituents posted on her website, Bachmann wrote, "I entered politics because I want to give my children the incredible educational experience I received from public schools as a student. No Child Left Behind must be repealed and control of our education returned to the local level."

As his eight years as Minnesota's governor wore on, TIM PAWLENTY's push against the teachers union grew stronger and more publicly divisive.

Shortly after his election in 2002, in an impromptu speech to business leaders, Pawlenty called for tying teacher pay to performance and

**feature**  
**REPUBLICANS SHERRY**

bringing up the state's standards. He also urged state lawmakers to authorize the use of a transparent growth model to see how well schools are really doing to improve student achievement. Yet, maybe because teachers union officials were in the audience, Pawlenty carefully parsed tenure, saying, "Seniority can remain a big factor, maybe even the main factor, in setting pay scales," according to news reports.

The speech underscored Pawlenty's sometimes mixed message to unions throughout his tenure: I'll try to work with you. That is until you don't work with me.

In 2005, Pawlenty passed a Minnesota-wide teacher pay-for-performance plan called "Q Comp," which rewards teachers based on evaluations. Though passed by the state legislature, the plan gave school districts and charter schools the choice of whether to participate and allows a district to collectively bargain a pay agreement that looks at professional development, teacher evaluation, and an alternative salary schedule.

When federal Race to the Top dollars became available, Pawlenty launched a statewide charter school initiative and moved to hone math and science instruction in schools. Still, Minnesota lost out, most notably because the application lacked support from the teachers union. Like all states, Minnesota had an opportunity to go for the second round of grants, but Pawlenty drew a line in the sand, saying he would only apply again if the union, and Democrats in the state legislature, agreed to more reforms.

At the time, Pawlenty also dialed up the rhetoric. The timing may have been personally fortuitous: He had declared he wasn't seeking another gubernatorial term in Minnesota and was flirting with a presidential run. It was good press: He was out there staking pitch-perfect positions on education reform.

"If they [the teachers unions] don't buy in and aren't partners in change, it's not going to work," Pawlenty said at a United Negro College Fund event in February of 2010. "We have to constructively and gently, or maybe not so gently, nudge them toward change."

Texas Governor RICK PERRY, if he runs, is likely to use his own state's successes to argue that the federal government should dramatically downsize in education.

While Perry has been outspoken against the Common Core, he and his education commissioner have pulled the quality of Texas tests up to a level respected among education reformers. Test scores among kids 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.

Though Perry will probably make this point on the campaign trail, he's not likely to promise to take over the nation's schools. On the contrary, he'll likely pick up on his recent call to repeal No Child Left Behind and let states take

charge of their education systems. In his book released last year, *Fed Up! Our Fight to Save America from Washington*, Perry argues that Washington has taken power away from states. At a speech in November in Washington, Perry took aim at two of former President Bush's signature accomplishments, No Child Left Behind and the Medicare drug benefit program, saying they were examples of areas in which Washington need not be.

"Those are both big government but more importantly, they were Washington-centric," he told the *Dallas Morning News*. "One size does not fit all, unless you're talking tube socks."

Since the start of his career teaching college in Georgia, former GOP House Speaker NEWT GINGRICH has cast education among the nation's most important domestic policy problems.

His views have developed through the years: In 1983, when the hallmark "A Nation at Risk" was released, Gingrich, a member of Congress at the time, traveled the country holding town hall meetings. He criticized American schools as "no more than holding pens for our children." In the 1990s, he called for the abolition of the U.S. Department of Education and opposed direct government loans to students.

In 2001, he authored a report that called the failure of math and science education among the greatest threats to national security, "greater than any conceivable war," he said.

Then in 2008 and 2009, his political ambitions on hiatus, Gingrich joined some odd bedfellows, among them civil rights activist Al Sharpton and former Democratic Colorado governor and Los Angeles schools chancellor Roy Romer, in a yearlong initiative to push education reform nationwide.

"I'm prepared to work side by side with every American who is committing to putting children first," he said in 2009 in a White House press conference, before praising President Obama for "showing courage" in pushing unions against charter school caps. "Not talking about it for 26 more years.... We could literally have the finest learning in the world if we were to systematically apply the things that work."

He continued, "I think we need to move forward from No Child Left Behind towards getting every American ahead."

But how we move toward providing each child with an appropriate education is the question. The Republican candidates all stress accountability and favor school choice, though they prefer leaving the federal government out of education policy decisions. Most of them emphasize reforms to enhance teacher quality, and they question the influence of teachers unions. They support high standards, if delegated to the states to devise and enforce. What they all have in common is a belief that education needs deep reform that goes beyond anything Democrats have proposed.

*Allison Sherry is Washington, D.C., bureau chief for the Denver Post.*