

The Party of Education in 2024

Will it be the Democrats? The Republicans? Or neither?

FOR DECADES, the Democrats were “the party of education,” ringing up double-digit leads in polls asking Americans which major party they trusted most to handle education. During parts of the Clinton and Obama presidencies, that lead topped 30 points. Now, though, the Dems’ edge has shrunk to just a few points, with the occasional poll showing Republicans nosing ahead. Even so, an increasing share of voters have confidence in neither party when it comes to education.

What’s going on, and how should the parties respond? As we enter a hotly-contested election cycle, *Education Next* asked a few prominent thinkers to examine the dynamics behind the Democrats’ fall from grace and offer advice to the two parties on how they should shape their education agenda. On the left, Ruy Teixeira, author of *The Emerging Democratic Majority* and last year’s *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?*, sketches a path forward for Democrats. And on the right, Frederick Hess and Michael McShane, co-authors of the new book *Getting Education Right: A Conservative Vision for Improving Early Childhood, K-12, and College*, explain what it’ll take for Republicans to seize the opportunity before them.



Republicans Have a Chance to Unite the Party on Education

By FREDERICK M. HESS and MICHAEL Q. MCSHANE

VOTER TRUST IN DEMOCRATS on education has plunged to the lowest level in memory, after years of school closures, critical race theory, gender radicalism, student-loan forgiveness, and campus craziness. Yet, in the face of brewing discontent—as the party of government, spending, teachers unions, and the faculty lounge—they find themselves mostly promising to subsidize an unhappy status quo. This gives the Right—unburdened by ties with unions, public bureaucracies, and the academy—a historic opportunity to defend shared values, empower students and families, and rethink outdated arrangements.

When push comes to shove, though, Republicans have

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Democrats Should Focus on Education Issues that Matter to Voters

By RUY TEIXEIRA

WHY ARE DEMOCRATS FUMBLING the issue of education, which they have dominated for many years? There are multiple reasons: they mishandled the Covid-related school closures, they are letting the culture wars distract from the core mission of schools, and they are downplaying the importance of merit and academic achievement. Before I discuss how the Dems could effect a turnaround, let’s dig deeper into these missteps and unfortunate trends.

The school closures went on way too long. Democrats, far more than Republicans, worked to keep public schools closed during the Covid pandemic—longer than in other advanced

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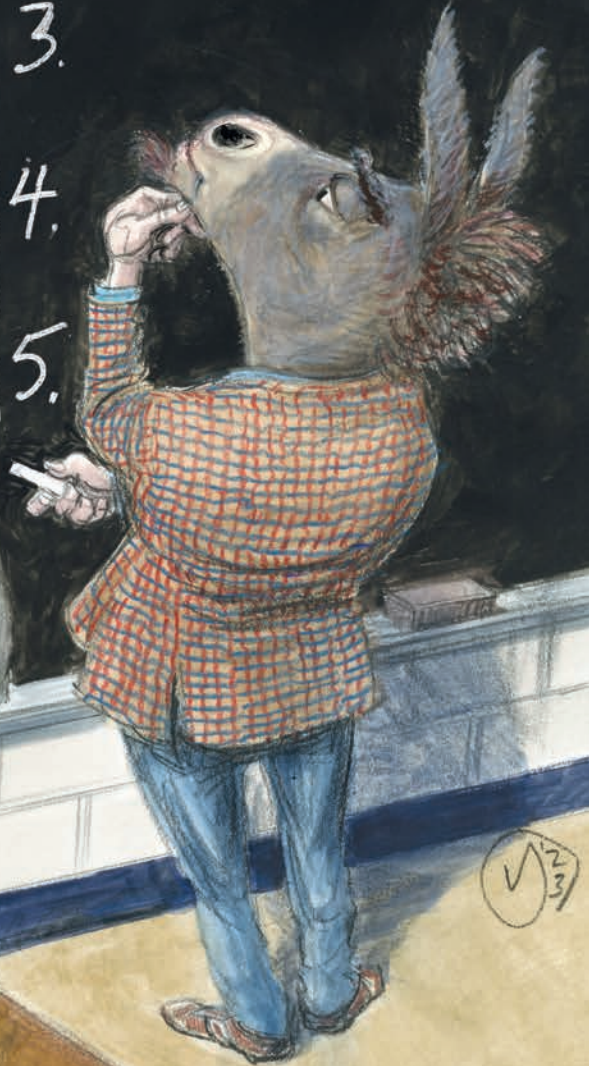
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struggled to offer practical solutions. Especially over the past decade, their agenda has mostly been a drumbeat of platitudes: school choice, free speech on campus, resisting wokeism, and keeping Washington out. More choice, less Washington is a sensible mantra, but a mantra isn't enough.

The fact that the go-to promise for GOP presidential candidates is “abolishing the Department of Education”—a 44-year-old, detail-free pledge that's proven an exercise in empty posturing—underscores how much more is needed. (Practically speaking, the department is a holding tank for tens of billions in Congressionally mandated federal programs. “Abolishing” it wouldn't accomplish much unless those programs were also addressed.) The real question is how Republicans plan to approach student lending, early childhood, culture clashes, credentialing, and other concerns. More on all that in a moment.

First, though, let's confront the elephant in the room: former president Donald Trump, who seems likely to head the



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GOP ticket in 2024. It's no great revelation to note that Trump approaches policy as performance art—with views an inch deep and inconstant. Education policy under a second Trump administration would depend on appointees and on which side of the bed Trump woke up that morning. Moreover, even if Trump returns to the White House, his prior tenure made clear that his attention to education is likely to be sporadic and fleeting. This all makes it less useful to focus on the standard-bearer than on the standard.

Now, we're not political prognosticators. As we write, there's still a long-shot chance that former United Nations ambassador Nikki Haley might somehow claim the nomination. But whatever happens in the primaries, Republicans need a more coherent, robust, and winning agenda. What does that agenda look like?

It starts with broadly shared values and translates those into actions that address kitchen-table concerns. The intriguing opportunity here is that education may be one of the few areas where the fierce split between Trump's populists and Reaganite conservatives can be most readily bridged. Both camps are skeptical of teachers unions, the college cartel, and calls to supersize Washington's role in education. Both support empowering parents, want schools to embrace notions like merit and hard work, and believe borrowers should repay federal student loans.

The familiar narrative of our culture clashes can be misleading: while the legacy media does its best to dance around the fact, the broad public tends to lean right on hot-button value debates.

According to a recent Gallup poll, two-thirds of Americans are “extremely” or “very” proud to be American. The call for schools to embrace the jaundiced, “America the ‘Slavocracy’” view

of history sketched by far-left icons such as Ibram X. Kendi and Nikole Hannah-Jones resonates with only a small (if vocal) community of academic elites and blue-state agitators. More than 90 percent of Democrats and Republicans alike agree that “all students should learn about how the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution advanced freedom and equality” and that “throughout our history, Americans have made incredible achievements and ugly errors.” And, as University of Alabama political scientist George Hawley, author of *Conservatism in a Divided America*, has documented, Republican voters have grown steadily more supportive of racial and religious minorities since 2000.

While the media made hay over Florida's “Don't Say Gay” law (a moniker they created themselves), Florida voters supported it by a margin of 61 percent to 26 percent when polled on the actual substance of the bill (which barred discussion of gender and sexuality in a non-age-appropriate manner in K–3 classrooms). In addition, more than two-thirds of Americans think that student-athletes should play on the team that matches their biological sex. Republicans are on principled, popular ground when they fight

to allow students to play on sports teams, use locker rooms, and sleep in dormitories that reflect their biological sex.

This broad agreement carries over to another area that Republicans should lean into: promoting excellence, rigor, and merit.

Talk about an easy sell. More than 80 percent of Americans say standardized tests such as the SAT and the ACT should factor into college admissions, and 94 percent think that hard work is important. Republicans should defend advanced instruction, gifted programs, hard work, and the importance of earned success. California recently approved new math standards that recommend postponing advanced math classes until high school, and Oregon has paused its requirement that students demonstrate literacy and numeracy to graduate. As these trends continue in blue states and cities, red state leaders should be highlighting the achievements of students in magnet schools and working to help more students access advanced coursework in high school.

Of course, Republicans struggled in 2022 and 2023 despite favorable conditions, especially in purple and blue states. They alienated suburban centrist voters with lousy candidates, a refusal to denounce Trump's offenses and conspiracy-mongering, and a stance on abortion at odds with post-*Dobbs* public sentiment. In short, Republicans have shown themselves prone to fumbling away opportunities. Doing better will require shrugging off slogan-driven groupthink in favor of workable solutions to practical concerns.

There's a world of difference, for instance, between arguing that pornographic books on gender identity don't belong in

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countries and far longer than was justified by emerging scientific understanding of the virus and its effects. Pushed by their allies in the teachers unions, Democrats ignored the justified warnings

that extended school closures would severely harm student learning and social development, especially for poorer children. The returns are now in, and it is clear that the warnings Democrats ignored were, if anything, too mild.

This was no minor error made by Democratic officials in the fog of pandemic confusion but a profound tragedy for millions of children that could have been avoided or at least substantially mitigated. To add to the shameful episode, parents in many communities around the country who wanted the schools reopened faster were frequently demonized by progres-

project rather than the traditional goals of public education.

Downgrading merit and educational achievement.

Consistent with this ongoing politicization of educational practices, there has been a concomitant downgrading of academic merit and standard measures of educational achievement, especially standardized tests. In the name of fairness and “equity,” school systems in Democratic-controlled states and counties have taken steps to de-emphasize such measures as a means of evaluating students and controlling admissions to advanced courses, programs, and elite schools.

It hasn’t quite reached the “all shall have prizes” stage, but the message to aspiring students and parents who see educational achievement as their route to upward mobility and success in life is clear: students can no longer rely on hard work and objectively good academic performance to attain their goals (see “Your Neighborhood School Is a National

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sives as heartless, anti-science right-wingers who didn’t care about public health. The wounds from this still fester today.

Privileging politics over pedagogy. The culture wars rage on in the schools. Democrats argue that it is all the fault of the Right, who they say wishes to “ban books,” prevent children from learning about slavery, and subject gay and transgender-identifying children to bullying and worse. Progressive educators and school systems, on the other hand, simply stand for a modern, inclusive education that no decent, unprejudiced person should oppose.

This is disingenuous in the extreme. Over the last decade, and especially after the George Floyd summer of 2020, there has been a concerted effort by many school systems and educators to promote “anti-racist” education that goes way beyond benign pedagogical practices such as teaching about slavery, Jim Crow, the Tulsa Race Massacre, redlining, and so on. Instead, pedagogy itself is to be infused, from top to bottom and in every subject, with concepts drawn from the anti-racist playbook. As noted by sociologist Ilana Redstone, these concepts include the assertion that “[a]n unwillingness to recognize the full force of systemic racism as determining disparities between groups is a denial of the reality of racism today (and evidence of ignorance at best and racism at worst).” An army of diversity, equity, and inclusion consultants have stood at the ready to assist school systems in training their staff and teachers to implement this creed and incorporate it into their curricula.

This is politics, not pedagogy as traditionally and properly understood. It has little to do with what most parents want schools to do: develop their children’s academic skills and knowledge base so they can succeed in the world. Democrats have been hurt by their increasing identification with this ideological

Security Risk,” *features*, Winter 2024). Other priorities of the school system may take precedence, reducing the payoff from their performance. This does not sit well with most parents, who see it as public schools’ responsibility to encourage and reward their children’s talent and hard work. Democrats have been hurt by their diminishing association with what parents care about the most.

Getting Their Groove Back

In light of all this, is it possible for Democrats to regain their mojo on education during the 2024 election cycle? I think it is, though it will require changing their approach considerably from current practices. And it’s worth doing so. Even if education is not a central issue in the presidential contest, it is sure to loom large in many congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative races.

Here’s how Democrats can decisively change their current image on education and rebuild their advantage on the issue.

Get ideology, whether from the Left or Right, out of schools. Voters are sick of the culture wars around schools. Overwhelmingly, they just want children to get a good education based on standard academic competencies, not instruction in a politically inflected worldview. Democrats must assure voters that the former is their number-one priority. Just as they oppose attempts from the Right to inject their ideology into schools by restricting critical discussion of American history and society, so they must also oppose efforts by those on the Left to impose their views on curricula and analysis of social issues. Neither is appropriate. The job of schools is to give students the tools to make informed judgments, not tell them what those judgments should be.

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middle school libraries and trying to bar high school seniors from reading *Beloved*. If Republicans don't firmly draw that line, they'll be successfully (and perhaps justifiably) tagged as "book banners." The same distinction holds for critical race theory: it must be made clear that stopping schools from imposing race-based affinity groups or promoting DEI-inspired racial caricatures via worksheets on "white privilege" is not intended to stymie history teachers from delving into hard questions about race relations in America. Republicans must do a better job of appreciating and making these distinctions.

What to Do?

The reason we've focused first on "culture war" issues is that education is deeply entangled with questions of core values. (A reluctance to confront this, we think, helped undermine well-meaning reform efforts in recent decades.) But Republicans must translate shared values into appealing principles. We'd start with four principles that span the schism between populists and Reaganite conservatives and that have allowed Republican governors as ideologically and temperamentally diverse as Ohio's Mike DeWine, Arkansas's Sarah Huckabee Sanders,



There's a world of difference between arguing that pornographic books on gender identity don't belong in middle school libraries and trying to bar high school seniors from reading *Beloved*.

Virginia's Glenn Youngkin, Iowa's Kim Reynolds, and Florida's Ron DeSantis to rack up big, popular successes:

Extend choice in K-12 education. The political case for parental choice has never been stronger. Especially after the pandemic, broad majorities of voters support an array of choice options. Yet the traditional case for *school* choice is limited by the fact that the lion's share of parents like their own child's school. The way to square this circle is by recognizing that even "satisfied" parents want more options, ranging from phonics-based reading instruction to a blend of home-based and in-school learning. Focus on maximizing options for all families (via education savings accounts, course access, charter schooling, and more), not on soundbites about blowing up "failing" local public-school systems.

Promote transparency. Parental empowerment requires equipping parents with choices—but these choices mean little without transparency. State reading and math tests are crucial, especially in an era of grade inflation and "grading for equity" that can make it hard to know how students are faring. Transparency also requires helping parents know what their child is being taught and by what name teachers are addressing them. (Today, simply trying to ascertain such things can subject parents to harassment and vilification.) Republicans should support policies that require parental notification and consent before schools administer intrusive surveys or transition a student's gender identification in class.

Be the party of reading and math. After decades during

which junk science and education-school ideologues shaped the nation's approach to reading, support for research-based reading instruction is surging—with happy results. This has been driven by policymakers willing to take on education schools and their progressive dogma. A similar effort is needed in math, where the devotees of the newest "new math" argue that kids don't need to know computation (see "California's New Math Framework Doesn't Add Up," *features*, Fall 2023), correct answers don't matter, and advanced math is racist. GOP governors should lean into these fights, demanding that schools, teacher training programs, and curriculum designers heed the science on reading and the fundamentals of math. In Washington, Republicans should make clear that federal funds will be directed to programs that actually work.

Broaden pathways to employment. There's widespread enthusiasm for better, more useful career and technical education. This is fueled both by concerns about the cost of college and by the sense that college today is, for too many, less a source of opportunity than an expensive hurdle to employment. Today, even for jobs like manning a rental-car counter, employers routinely treat college degrees as an all-purpose hiring credential. This can be addressed by improving career and technical education and by reforming the legal and policy conditions that lead employers to put more

weight on paper credentials than on knowledge, experience, and skills. While there are well-established legal perils when relying on other more-precise hiring tests, the courts have turned a blind eye when employers use degrees in that same fashion. This asymmetry has turned higher education from a potentially useful avenue to acquire valuable skills into a mandatory exercise in ticket-punching. Across the land, Republican governors and mayors should join the growing list of their peers who have removed degree requirements for many or most state jobs. In Washington, it's worth revisiting statutes and regulations regarding the use of degrees and working with employer organizations to develop and validate hiring tests that will pass judicial muster.

Parents are profoundly practical people. They're not interested in abstractions when it comes to their own kids. That's why school choice took off in the wake of the pandemic; it was no longer a theoretical exercise but a response to maddening, overwhelming frustration. As noted earlier, education is an area where there are straightforward, principled ways to appeal to populists and traditionalists alike. We think that's very much a consequence of practicality. For instance, the focus on excellence and transparency can address both populist frustration with politicization and traditionalist concerns about academic achievement. Expanding pathways to employment appeals both to traditionalists worried about workforce needs and populists eager to shrink the footprint

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Articulating this point would signal to voters that Democratic politicians understand what the real priorities of schools should be. But they shouldn't leave it at that. They should advocate the addition of something positive to schools—that is, to “teach kids what it means to be an American,” in the words of Albert Shanker, the pathbreaking president of the American Federation of Teachers in the late 20th century.

By doing so, Democrats could dissociate themselves from the jaundiced and divisive attitudes of many progressive

But here's what ordinary voters believe: “Racial achievement gaps are bad and we should seek to close them. However, they are not due just to racism, and standards of high achievement should be maintained for people of all races.” This statement was tested in a nationwide poll of more than 18,000 registered voters by RMG Research and elicited 74 percent agreement versus a mere 16 percent disagreement. In Wisconsin, the statement generated agreement by 91 percent of Republicans and 64 percent of *Democrats*.

Democratic politicians should fearlessly endorse this statement and assure voters that they are all about high standards, high achievement, and how they go together in

The job of schools is to give students the tools to make informed judgments, not tell them what those judgments should be.



activists and embrace instead an approach emphasizing what students have in common as *Americans*. As education scholar Richard Kahlenberg writes, civics instruction in public schools should embrace (or get back to) teaching

the core of the American Creed: the veneration of liberty and equality promised by the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. . . . The Declaration and Constitution provide, as the Fordham Institute notes, “a common framework for resolving our differences even as we respect them.” . . . In emphasizing America's distinctive system of governance, students can appreciate a shared American identity focused on shared values that counters both right-wing white identity politics that sees only white Christians as “real Americans” and left-wing race essentialism that sees a person's race, ethnicity, gender, and religion as far more important than what citizens have in common as Americans.

Maintain high achievement standards for all groups, even while seeking to close racial disparities. The Democrats have a merit problem, and that has infected their approach to schools and schooling. The traditional Democratic theory of the case ran like this: discrimination should be opposed and dismantled and resources provided to the disadvantaged so that everyone can fairly compete and achieve. Those who were meritorious would be rewarded; those who weren't would not be.

Democrats have lost interest in the last part of their case, and that abandonment undermines their whole theory. Merit and objective measures of achievement are now viewed with suspicion as the outcomes of a hopelessly corrupt system, so rewards should instead be allocated on the basis of various criteria allegedly related to social justice. Instead of dismantling discrimination and providing assistance so that more people have the opportunity to acquire merit, the real solution is to worry less about merit and more about equal outcomes—“equity” in the parlance of our times.

successful schooling. Democrats should forthrightly oppose the watering down of academic standards in the name of equity and defend elite programs based on academic merit and rigorous tests. The latter is particularly important for reaching Asian voters and stopping the ongoing decline in their support for Democrats.

Provide more choice within the public school system. Public schools have been losing students lately to private schools and homeschooling, as misplaced priorities and academic failures in many public schools have some parents heading for the exits. That typically means they aren't happy with the public school their child is assigned to. An obvious way to mitigate this problem is simply to give parents more choice of where they can send their child to school, through both more options within the local school system and a wider array of charter schools.

More choice is especially important for low-income parents whose children generally do not fare well when attending schools that lack a middle-class presence. This calls for a concerted effort to widen public school choice so that all low-income children have access to theme-based non-selective magnet schools, diverse-by-design charter schools, and other high-quality options that attract students across economic levels.

Democrats ignore parents' interest in choice to their peril. Polling by *Education Next* shows support for choice options such as charter schools, universal vouchers, and vouchers for low-income families going up in recent years (see “Partisan Rifts Widen, Perceptions of School Quality Decline,” *features*, Winter 2023). This support is particularly strong among Hispanics, low-income households, and especially Blacks, who are the demographic group most interested in vouchers. If Democrats wish to counter GOP appeals to their most loyal constituency, they must convince these voters that their strong interest in more choice can be met within a reformed public school system.

Promote affirmative action by class, not race. In the wake of the June 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down

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of colleges they view as indoctrination factories.

Opportunity Knocks

This is only a start, of course.

Republicans have been mostly playing defense on several issues where it's time for them to get off their heels and take the lead.

Student-loan forgiveness was a bit of progressive dogma that candidate Joe Biden did not embrace during the campaign, but as president he promoted an illegal half-trillion-dollar giveaway to the advantaged and the affluent. Republicans have done well to call out this "solution" for what it is: an expensive way to fuel college price hikes, encourage students to take on more debt, and treat taxpayers like suckers.

At the same time, the underlying problem of college costs is real and absolutely needs to be addressed. State officials who fund and oversee public universities should step up. They should champion efforts to reduce staff, boost teaching loads, and accelerate time-to-degree (such as by exploring three-year bachelor's degrees). They should tackle a stifling accreditation system that protects mediocre incumbents and imposes prohibitive costs on

education savings accounts in early childhood education; nurture a rich array of community and work-based arrangements; reduce regulatory burdens that stymie faith-based and low-cost providers; and ensure that funding doesn't penalize families that choose "family, friend, or neighbor" care.

Then there's the fraught relationship between the GOP and the individuals whom Americans look to for guidance on schooling: the nation's teachers. It's remarkable, if you think about it, that conservatives—who tend to energetically support front-line public employees such as cops and who have a natural antipathy for bureaucrats and red tape—have had so much trouble connecting with teachers. Like police officers, teachers are well-liked local public servants frustrated by bureaucracy and paperwork.

Republicans who have stood up for parents troubled by bureaucratic malaise, cultural adventurism, and unsafe schools should extend those same intuitions to the nation's teachers. They should champion discipline policies that keep teachers safe and classrooms manageable. They should fight to downsize bloated bureaucracy and shift those dollars into classrooms and teacher pay. They should challenge expensive and onerous licensing regimes that keep qualified and talented teachers out of the classroom. And they should make clear that with parental rights come



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potential new alternatives. They should demand good data on the costs and student outcomes of various institutions and degree programs. Federal officials should insist that colleges tapping federal student loans have "skin in the game," repaying taxpayers when their former students default.

During his much-admired tenure as president of Purdue University, former Indiana governor Mitch Daniels managed to freeze tuition for over a decade. It can be done.

In early childhood education, President Biden tried to spend \$400 billion to promote universal pre-K in his Build Back Better push, and Republicans successfully blocked the effort. They were right to do so, as it was going to be a giveaway to the unions and early-education advocates. It would have driven up the cost of care, needlessly bureaucratized early education, and ultimately dropped kids into impersonal centers—in other words, it would have created a de facto additional grade of elementary school.

That said, parents are frustrated with their early-childhood options. Childcare is expensive. It can be of suspect quality. It can be hard to find providers that align with parental schedules. Working parents who'd like to be home with their young children find themselves compelled to put their kids into center-based care.

In a party looking to attract parents, one would think that Republicans would muster a meaningful counterproposal. They did not. But that doesn't mean that they *cannot*.

Republicans can embrace choice-based policies such as

parental responsibilities, which means parents partnering with teachers to ensure that their kids are in school, respecting their teachers, getting a good night's sleep, and doing their homework.

This is an opportunity for a divided Republican party to reassure Americans that it is the steward of shared values. As it becomes more of a working-class party, the GOP has ever less reason to defer to the cultural pieties of education elites and ever more cause to insist that early childhood and higher education be accessible, affordable, cost-effective, and attuned to workforce realities. Education is the path to economic opportunity and moral fulfillment, and it's an issue with deep symbolic resonance in American life. The GOP can win over new constituencies while signaling that the party is serious about inclusion and opportunity.

Republicans should work to empower families, defend broadly shared values, emphasize achievement, and challenge self-serving cartels. They should also strive to ensure that early childhood education is accessible, affordable, and anchored in communities. If Republicans do so, we predict that their efforts will become a case study in doing well by doing good.

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race-conscious college admissions, Democratic National Committee Chair Jaime Harrison declared, “This is a devastating blow for racial justice and equality. . . . We condemn the Supreme

Court’s decision to end these affirmative action policies and make it even more difficult for Americans to access higher education. While this decision is a setback . . . it is not the final word.”

This is exactly the wrong approach for Democrats to take. Rather than implicitly or explicitly pledging to resist the law of the land, they would be far wiser to use the decision as an opportunity to rebrand themselves as the party of America’s

admissions officer as folks who are pretty advantaged. . . . I think that we should take into account [in admissions] white kids who have been disadvantaged and have grown up in poverty.” In other words, a Black kid who grew up in a poor neighborhood in Baltimore and a white kid who grew up in a shattered working class neighborhood in Ohio are both more deserving of a boost than upper-middle-class kids of whatever race.

That would strike most working-class voters as eminently fair. It is especially fair in light of the breathtaking lack of economic diversity at elite schools. That’s why it’s important to think of class-based affirmative action as not just a substitute for a race-based system that would accomplish some of the same goals. It would be in and of itself a step

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working class—the entire working class.

Start with the brutal fact that racial preferences are very unpopular. For instance, the spring 2023 SCOTUSPoll, sponsored by Harvard, Stanford, and the University of Texas, found 69 percent of the public agreeing that private colleges and universities should not be able to use race as a factor in admissions, compared to 31 percent who favored the practice. The same question about public colleges and universities elicited at 74–26 split. Pretty definitive.

Why is this? It’s very simple. Most voters, especially working-class voters, think racial preferences are not fair, and fairness is a fundamental part of their world outlook. They actually believe in Martin Luther King Jr.’s credo that people should “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” In a recent University of California Dornsife survey, this classic statement of colorblind equality was posed to respondents: “Our goal as a society should be to treat all people the same without regard to the color of their skin.” The sentiment elicited sky-high (92 percent) agreement from the public, despite the assaults on this idea from critical race theory and the likes of Ibram X. Kendi and large segments of the Democratic Left.

The way for Democrats to get back in touch with voters on this issue is clear: advocate replacing race-based affirmative action with class-based affirmative action, instead of overtly or covertly trying to preserve the former. Class-based affirmative action would boost proportionately more Black and Hispanic students than white ones, thereby making up at least part of the losses in Black and Hispanic representation that follow from eliminating race-based consideration.

But it would also boost some disadvantaged white students, and that would be a good thing, both substantively and politically. As President Barack Obama memorably put it in 2008: “I think that my daughters should probably be treated by any

toward pushing back against the incredible class bias of elite education. As David Leonhardt put it in his *New York Times* column:

Economic diversity matters for its own sake: The dearth of lower-income students at many elite colleges is a sign that educational opportunity has been constrained for Americans of all races. To put it another way, economic factors such as household wealth are not valuable merely because they are a potential proxy for race; they are also a telling measure of disadvantage in their own right.

This approach could turn affirmative action from an issue that divides the working class into one that potentially unites it. Given how Democrats have been hemorrhaging working-class voters, this change of focus seems like a wise course of action.

Restoring Strength

Taken together, the four steps outlined here could decisively change the current Democratic brand on education, which is steadily losing altitude, into one that would restore their historic strength on the issue. To be sure, taking these steps would require some political courage, risking the wrath of the progressive activists who have helped power their success in recent low turnout, off-year elections. But 2024 will be a far different electoral environment where the views of activists will be less important and those of ordinary voters more so. Democrats would be wise to place their bets on the latter by taking these steps and charting a new course.

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