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The GOP wants to be the education party. Democrats have to fight back.

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One of the most consequential legacies of America's response to the pandemic could be a sharp rightward turn in education policy across much of the country — to the detriment of a generation of students.

For decades, voters overwhelmingly trusted Democrats to make education policy. But that changed during the covid-19 pandemic as the party squandered an advantage that had been as large as 20 points. Blue states and districts generally kept students in Zoom school far longer than red states. Some education leaders glossed over the disaster this created for learning and equity, and even shamed supporters who pointed out those impacts.

Democrats need to own up to this, and work hard to fix it. Otherwise they risk leaving our nation and our schools in the hands of Republicans, whose activist vanguard deems public education a major internal threat to the country.

Republican lawmakers won many parents' trust, or at least, sympathy, with full-throated, unified support for opening public schools and operating them as normally as possible during the covid-19 pandemic.

By contrast, Democrats split. Some parents got fed up with extended closures and mask mandates, while others, especially Black, Hispanic and Asian American families, remained more covid cautious. Democratic leaders — with notable exceptions — struggled to balance parent factions, union demands and shifting public health directives. Children lost out.

Republican governors such as Ron DeSantis in Florida and Glenn Youngkin in Virginia appear to see education, and in particular, parents' input, as the issue that can give them an edge with swing voters.

But if Republican support for keeping schools open and paying teachers enough to keep them staffed is mainstream, the agenda of party activists is more radical.

They have smeared LGBTQ teachers as “groomers,” embraced book bans, dismantled curriculums under cover of charges of “reverse racism” and attacked children who don’t conform to a narrow conception of gender roles.

The party has long promoted measures such as vouchers and home schooling under the rhetoric of parent choice. But their vision, as articulated clearly by think tanks such as the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, is ending the “monopoly” of “government schools.” The ideologues got a boost from two Supreme Court decisions this summer, both of which combined to drive a truck through the wall separating church and state in education, allowing public funds to flow to religious private schools and allowing prayer in public schools.

So how can Democrats regain power and their position as advocates for students?

Across the political spectrum, parent support for their own schools and teachers remains strong, as it has been for decades. The preference shows up in incidents such as a recent dust-up in deep-red Tennessee, where the Republican governor and other conservative politicians had to distance themselves from a Christian college president whose “patriotic” curriculum they had embraced when he mocked schoolteachers’ intellect at a private event. And schools and parents are mostly aligned on what the priorities should be right now: fundamentals, such as math, reading and science, as well as mental health.

That’s good news for Democrats. To reclaim the education party mantle, the party needs an apology tour and renewed focus on the basics.

The first step is to come clean on how children were harmed by prolonged school closures, and to stop running from terms such as “learning loss.”

Despite understandable fears and uncertainty, our peer nations largely managed to reopen schools by fall 2020, and it turned out, relatively safely. The United States is an outlier both in our high death toll from covid, and in the length of time millions of our children were learning at home.

The results are clear. The “Nation’s Report Card” just released shows a drop in reading and math scores that erased two decades of progress in two years.

Democrats sound obtuse when they play down this impact, as United Teachers Los Angeles head Cecily Myart-Cruz did in a notorious interview last summer in which she declared “It’s OK that our babies may not have learned all their times tables. They learned resilience.” Instead, they need to take a page from Newark Teachers Union president John Abeigon, who has been blunt that learning loss “could go on for a generation if it’s not addressed now.”

There’s also a vocal minority of “open schools” parents, Democrats and former Democrats, who sorely want it acknowledged that they were right all along. They deserve that — and an apology from those who labeled their position racist.

Once we’ve done that accounting, fixing it comes next.

Voters need to hear clearly and often where the \$122 billion the federal government allocated to schools for covid relief is going. Democrats should draw a distinction between the Republican obsession with turning schools into ideological training grounds and a Democratic focus on learning fundamentals.

And regaining some credibility on education might also require Democrats to put a little daylight between themselves and the unions most publicly associated with extending school closures.

Republicans might have claimed the headlines on education, but in the long term, Democrats have the right priorities. The party might have lost sight of children's best interests, but the public has not.