

MarketWatch

There's \$2.6 billion in education funding up for grabs in the midterm elections

Education was the second most mentioned topic in advertisements for gubernatorial candidates of both parties

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From teacher strikes to criticism of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, the politics of education and how it's funded, have featured prominently in the national conversation over the last year. The midterms are no exception.

When voters head to the polls Tuesday in many states, they'll have the opportunity to weigh in on how their political leaders approach the education of their children. And candidates seem to know it. Education was the second most mentioned topic, in advertisements for gubernatorial candidates of both parties, according to the Wesleyan Media Project, an initiative at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., that tracks political advertising.

It makes sense that in a mid-term cycle with less focus on a national, presidential election, education funding is taking more of a spotlight. That's because the bulk of money allocated to public schools comes from state and local coffers.

"The state and local elections are much more important in a lot of ways," than federal elections, when it comes to how K-12 schools will be funded, said Scott Sargrad, the managing director of the K-12 education policy program at the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank.

Here are a few education-related decisions voters will have the opportunity to make on election day:

Ballot Initiatives

In 12 states, including New Jersey, Colorado and Maine, voters can weigh in on education-related ballot initiatives. These measures have the potential to provide at least \$2.6 billion in education funding at all levels — early childhood, K-12 and higher education, according to a recent analysis by CAP.

These ballot initiatives propose raising money for education funding in one of two ways — either through taxes or bonds. If approved, tax-based measures would allow states to raise taxes on certain people or organizations and use the extra money to boost education funding. If passed, the bond-based initiatives would allow states to issue bonds to fund educational priorities, including school infrastructure.

“There’s real money on the ballot from those kinds of things,” Sargrad said.

Changing the state funding formula in other ways

During the Great Recession, many states, strapped for resources, cut funding to education. In the years since, few states have returned to funding schools at the level they did 10 years ago, according to CAP.

The teacher walkouts in several states this year, focused voters’ attention on the ways that these cuts may be affecting their local schools, Sargrad said. And in many states, voters have the opportunity to elect governors and state legislators who may choose to change that trajectory — likely by raising taxes — or continue it.

If Democrats are as successful on the state level, it’s likely we’ll see a push in many regions to increase spending on K-12 education in the months following the election, said Neal McCluskey, the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a right-leaning think tank.

That may also be the case if Republicans do well, he said. “There’s been a pretty clear message in a lot of places that folks would like to spend more on education,” he said.

While politicians in both parties are often eager to tout their willingness to spend more money on education, they’re less interested in talking about how they’d pay for it, McCluskey said.

Democrats may be more likely to raise taxes, but McCluskey suspects that regardless of the election outcome, any increase in education spending will likely be paid for in part through an uptick in taxes on the rich and/or corporations.

Given that the economy is strong and public schools are being funded at historically low per-student levels, it will be harder for politicians of either party to say “we just can’t afford it,” McCluskey added.

Electing more teachers to office

Of course, the teacher walkouts not only influenced voters, it likely changed the mix of candidates on the ballot. This year, roughly 1,800 educators are running for office, according to the National Education Association, a teacher’s union.

In Wisconsin, the state’s superintendent is vying to become the governor. “There are just some education candidates that are really interesting,” Sargrad said. Whether those credentials are enough to sway voters will be decided on Tuesday.