

Education system new campaign battleground

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Georgia's schools are known for playgrounds, not battlegrounds.

Yet as Georgia's midterm election gets underway, with early in-person voting and absentee balloting now open, topics related to the state's public K-12 school as well as colleges and universities are campaign fodder. Candidates are stumping on everything from student loan debt to gender identity in the classroom and on athletic fields.

Education-related issues have become especially core to politicians this campaign cycle. Private equity fund titan Glenn Youngkin leveraged voter outrage over K-12 school curricula to win the Virginia governorship a year ago, and his fellow Republicans across the nation have seized upon education as a new political wedge issue.

How much education resonates with the electorate will be determined at the polls. Here's what you need to know about the issues and how candidates are using education to drive turnout.

Fighting the culture wars

Beth Majeroni, a retired educator, is no stranger to politics. When she moved to Savannah, she got involved with local conservative groups like Ladies on the Right, which she cochairs. Majeroni regularly speaks at Savannah-Chatham School Board meetings about what she calls "the culture wars."

"Critical race theory, social emotional learning, comprehensive sex education, pornographic books, or

Continued from [Page 1A](#)

gender fluidity," she listed.

"All of those things are just working to undermine the nuclear family and erase females."

These topics are highly controversial, even among conservatives. But Majeroni believes they will motivate parents to cast their votes. She points to Youngkin's win in Virginia as an example.

"Think about what happened in Virginia - when Gov. Youngkin won by vowing to stop indoctrination in our schools," she said. "I think that's huge."

The culture wars certainly get plenty of attention. Republican Herschel Walker, a U.S. Senate candidate, has echoed many of these talking points in campaign speeches, calling gender transition "unnatural" and suggesting a ban on trans girls in high school sports. Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, who is running for re-election, frequently touts the passage of a bill restricting the teaching of "divisive concepts" in the classroom while on the campaign trail.

Majeroni thinks that parents will have outsized effects on Georgia state politics this year.

"If 2010 was year of the Tea Party, 2022 is the year of the Parent Party," said Majeroni.

'The numbers aren't there'

But Alex Ames, who works with the Georgia Youth Justice Coalition, pushed back on Majeroni's prediction about the impact of parents flocking to the polls..

“What Brian Kemp would need to win the suburbs in Georgia would be for white voters in these communities to be dead set on electing someone who’s going to ban books. And the numbers aren’t there,” they said. “It’s really unpopular.”

A Feb. 2022 poll from CBS News and YouGov shows that 85% of Americans oppose banning books containing ideas they disagree with. Ames asserts that the majority of parents, students and educators care less about the culture wars and more about funding.

“Every one of my friends has gone to underfunded schools. They’ve gone to schools with major gas leaks, schools that don’t have disability access, schools with rats and mold and collapsing walls,” Ames said.

“You got class in a trailer with no AC in the parking lot, and that’s seen as like, standard practice. That should not be considered quality public education.”

Though arguments about gender identity and racism in the classroom have gained traction with Republicans and Democrats, at bottom, Ames thinks schools are facing bigger problems.

“We almost never hear from parents on any side of the aisle saying that when their kid gets off the school bus, they’re scared of trans kids on the soccer team,” they said.

“No, they’re scared about Uvalde and they’re scared about school funding shortages.”

The student debt question

So-called “divisive concepts” in K-12 schools are far from the only education-related issue at stake this year. President Joe Biden’s recent decision to forgive some federal student loans has made college debt a topic of interest, particularly among Millennials and Gen Z. Several Democrat candidates running statewide, such as Sen. Raphael Warnock, have come out in support of student loan forgiveness.

Maggie Bell, a youth organizer with the New Georgia Project, thinks politicians are right to speak out about it.

“I think that funding for education needs to be a priority,” she said. “Debt is a big issue specifically for Black and brown borrowers.”

The Education Data Initiative found in 2022 that Black college graduates owe on average \$25,000 more in student loans than do white college graduates. Bell believes student loan forgiveness could get young people, particularly young people of color, to the polls. But organizing the youth vote has its obstacles.

“I have encountered some voters who don’t even know that it’s an election year because they only pay attention to the big air quotes, like presidential elections, and whatever else is on the ballot,” she said. “Gen Z and Millennials haven’t had the opportunity to get that good, solid voter education.”

But in the course of canvassing at universities throughout Georgia, Bell has also seen a lot of enthusiasm from young people.

“After coming out of the 2020 election and all of the momentum that we saw from young voters, this will still be a historic election where we can say that young people make this happen.” she said.

“I’ll say that interacting with Georgians now I am encountering more young people who are excited to vote and have a plan to vote.”

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Maggie Bell, a youth organizer with the New Georgia Project



Majeroni

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