



# Romney's Paltry Education Plan

## Republican Presidential Candidate's Plan for Our Nation's Schools Is Short on Detail, Long on Rhetoric

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### Introduction

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney has been running for president for six years and he still doesn't have a detailed education plan. He rarely talks about education on the stump, and when he does, he rails against federal spending rather than discussing ways to improve struggling schools or the lives of disadvantaged students. Gov. Romney's pick of Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) to be his running mate solidified that his stance on education matches his economic vision: cut programs for the disadvantaged in order to pay for benefits to the wealthy. Gov. Romney's main education idea is to turn federal money for disadvantaged students into vouchers that could be spent in private schools.

This brief outlines the few, mostly bad ideas Gov. Romney has put forward on education, including his mixed record as governor of Massachusetts and his flip-flopping record as long-term presidential candidate. Americans do and should expect more from those who want to govern the nation. When two-thirds of students are not reaching grade-level and one-third fail to even graduate high school, the stakes are too high to be short on big ideas.

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### The Romney plan: Where's the plan?

Gov. Romney unveiled his education plan—"A Chance for Every Child"—in May 2012. At the time he said education is central to the American Dream and represents the civil rights issue of our era.<sup>1</sup> But despite his preamble, Gov. Romney's plan is long on rhetoric, short on detail, and full of half-baked ideas. The following chart summarizes his plan.

## Romney's K-12 education plan<sup>2</sup>

### Choice and innovation

1. Turn federal funds for low-income and special needs students into vouchers that can be used at any public or private school, or for tutoring or digital courses
2. Eliminate caps on charter and digital schools
3. Invest federal funds in expanding high-quality charter schools
4. Expand the DC Opportunity Scholarship (voucher) Program

### Standards and responsibility

1. Eliminate federal requirements that low-performing schools take certain actions to improve
2. Continue requiring states to report data on student achievement, but require states to grade schools on an A to F (or similar) scale

### Great teachers

1. Eliminate the federal requirement that teachers obtain certification to teach
2. Consolidate existing federal teacher programs into one block grant and require states to do the following to receive funds:
  - Establish evaluation systems that measure teacher impact on student learning
  - Reward and promote teachers and principals that show results
  - Eliminate or reform teacher tenure
  - Streamline the certification process<sup>3</sup>
  - Prohibit seniority-based transfer and dismissal rules

Let's take a brief look at each issue.

### Vouchers

Gov. Romney's plan proposes turning all federal funds for low-income and special needs students—Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—into vouchers that students could then use to attend any school in the state—another traditional public school, a public charter school, or a private school. Private schools would have to administer state tests, but they would not be held accountable for how well students learn. This amounts to a government handout to private schools without asking for measurable positive results in return. That alone is bad enough, but one also wonders if students would be protected from discrimination in admissions or during their time at the school. Who knows? The plan doesn't say.

Similarly, students could transfer to another public school in another district, but only if that school has the capacity to accept them.<sup>4</sup> Interdistrict choice isn't a bad idea, but

suburban districts with more money and less diversity are hardly likely to open their doors to low-income students across district boundaries. The end result is that Gov. Romney has given schools a loophole and has left disadvantaged students without a guarantee of getting in to a better school. Moreover, Gov. Romney is trampling on states' and districts' rights to determine enrollment policies and school district boundaries. Some might call this federal overreach and hypocrisy, since Gov. Romney often criticizes President Barack Obama for using federal funds to coerce states into adopting his policies.

Under his plan, Gov. Romney would expand the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, which gives vouchers to public school students that can be used to attend private schools. This is essentially a federal earmark for private schools in one city. The plan does not explain why it focuses on one city to the exclusion of others. For example, why not also support the Milwaukee voucher program? Regardless of the location of the program, one wonders why public taxpayer money is sent to private, mostly religious schools.

In terms of charter schools, Gov. Romney calls for nothing more than to simply increase funding and to ensure that the federal funding formula is on par with other public schools. That's hardly innovative or much of a plan. Nor is it even a difference between himself and President Obama, who has devoted funds to replicating and expanding high-quality charter schools every year in his budget. Here it is important to remember that federal funds should not be spent on just any charter school, but on those that serve all students and achieve results with those students.

### Lack of accountability

Gov. Romney says his plan will ensure that students will have the skills they need to succeed after graduation, but it eliminates requirements to take action when students and schools underperform. And it fails to say whether or not schools will have to set goals and meet those goals to improve student performance. This is a set-back from current law and would weaken the leverage struggling students and their parents have to press for better schools.

Instead, Gov. Romney's plan relies on merely reporting data to improve the system. It would require states to grade schools on an A to F (or similar) scale, continue reporting student achievement data broken down by subgroups, and continue comparing state test results to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. That's it. This is not groundbreaking by any measure since states already carry out the last two requirements. And it is hardly a way to eliminate differences in achievement among student groups. Simply describing the problem and hoping things somehow get better (through vouchers) is not a comprehensive approach to education reform. It is, however, a failure of imagination and political will.

## Teachers

Gov. Romney says he will transform the teaching profession, but his plan lacks innovation and would dole out taxpayer money without requiring results. His proposal would eliminate the federal requirement that teachers obtain state certification to enter the classroom. Further, he would turn all federal teacher programs into a block grant that states choose to receive if they agree to a set of reforms—reforms that don't have to lead to better classroom outcomes in order to continue receiving money. The requirements are summed up in one sentence with no detail or explanation:

*States seeking block grants will be required to establish evaluation systems based in part on effectiveness in advancing student achievement, reward effective teachers and principals with additional compensation and advancement opportunities, eliminate or reform teacher tenure, streamline the certification process for becoming a teacher, and prohibit seniority-based transfer and dismissal rules (including Last In, First Out layoffs).<sup>5</sup>*

These ideas are not all bad, and many are borrowed from the Obama administration, which has supported better evaluation systems, performance-based pay, and career advancement opportunities. So Gov. Romney has proposed nothing that distinguishes himself from the president, and he contradicts himself by calling for the elimination of certification yet requiring states to “streamline” the process.

## What's missing?

Gov. Romney's education plan not only contains weak or bad ideas, contradictions, and little detail, it also fails to say anything about key issues on the minds of parents and the public, such as:

- **School turnaround.** How can we actually improve chronically underperforming schools? Vouchers give some students resources to leave schools, but the Romney plan says nothing about helping struggling students who don't take a voucher or about improving their schools in the first place. This is ironic since Gov. Romney wrote an entire book on his turnaround of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games.<sup>6</sup>
- **Fair funding.** How can we ensure schools are funded equitably? The United States is one of only three developed nations that spend less money on poor students than on wealthier ones.<sup>7</sup> The Romney plan doesn't even mention this problem or offer solutions for it.
- **Principals.** How can we improve the performance of school leaders? Research shows that principals make a huge impact on student learning, but the Romney plan only mentions principals in one sentence about merit pay and career ladders.

- **English learners.** How can we better educate students learning English? Demographics are changing. From 1998 to 2008 the number of English learner students increased from 3.5 million to 5.3 million, an estimated 1 in 10 students nationwide.<sup>8</sup> The Romney plans fails to even mention “English learners” let alone offering strategies for educating them.
- **Innovation.** How can we seed and harness new ways to educate students and structure the education system? Gov. Romney’s plan is shortsighted in believing that digital courses and vouchers alone will “catapult our schools into the 21st century.”<sup>9</sup>
- **Productivity.** How can we ensure taxpayer dollars are spent efficiently and effectively? Gov. Romney says his plan will ensure money is spent well, but he does not ask for results in exchange for taxpayer dollars. Ironically, his K-12 education co-chair is Martin West, a professor at Harvard University who has published important work on educational productivity.<sup>10</sup>

Gov. Romney has spoken very little about education on the campaign trail since unveiling his plan this past spring. Perhaps that is because he has little to talk about. He did visit a charter school in Philadelphia the day after releasing his plan. The conversation was tense, the mood awkward, and residents stood outside shouting, “Get out, Romney, get out.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps fearing more reactions like these might also be discouraging him from talking about education.

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## Romney’s education record: What record?

Gov. Romney often touts his record on education from the time when he was governor of Massachusetts. “During his tenure,” the Romney plan claims, “Massachusetts became the first state to lead the nation in both reading and math in both fourth and eighth grade and fared well against the top nations in math and science.”<sup>12</sup> To the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, during its national convention, Gov. Romney bragged, “When I was governor, not only did test scores improve—we also narrowed the achievement gap.”<sup>13</sup>

Yes, the Bay state does have strong student achievement, high standards, and significant financial investment in education. But did Gov. Romney’s actions lead to this result? Was he right to claim credit before the NAACP? Most observers would say “no” or “maybe,” at best.

PolitiFact dug into this question. It found that Massachusetts made major policy changes in 1993—well before Mitt Romney became governor in 2003—that deserve much of the credit for student growth. While he may have continued or preserved those policies—“Romney, a single-term governor, should not get all the credit for improve-

ment in the achievement gap, which is influenced by myriad factors. His statement is partially accurate but omits a lot of important information and overstates his impact. We rate it Half True.”<sup>14</sup>

So what exactly did Gov. Romney propose and accomplish in education that might illuminate what he would do as president? As with all things Romney, it’s hard to tell.

### What Romney did

Gov. Romney’s signature education proposal was the Legacy of Learning initiative, which he unveiled in his State of the State address in January 2004.<sup>15</sup> The governor sought to:

- Fund full-day kindergarten in low-performing school districts
- Fund “after school and summer school special help sessions”
- Force parents of children in “troubled schools” to attend a parent preparation course
- Fund programs for disruptive youth to take “discipline problems out of the classroom”
- Train, recruit, and reward teachers who specialize in math and science
- Authorize principals to “remove any teacher that cannot succeed with our kids”
- Provide top-scoring students tuition-free scholarships to state universities

Gov. Romney failed to pass any of his proposals with the exception of the college scholarship program. The scholarship program, however, has been roundly criticized because it only covered a small portion of higher-education expenses and because a “disproportionately small number of the state’s minority students or students from disadvantaged families qualified for the grants.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps that is why he does not reference Legacy of Learning on the webpage devoted to his record. In fact, according to the website, the governor’s K-12 record consists of only a few items, two of which he did not accomplish:

- Increased parental choice by expanding the number of charter schools
- Proposed (but did not accomplish) a teacher merit pay program
- Proposed (but did not accomplish) greater state intervention in low-performing schools and
- Presided over a state whose students outscored those in other states<sup>17</sup>

In addition, Gov. Romney proposed more funding for English as a second language programs but sought to eliminate bilingual education and disallow any language but English in the classroom.<sup>18</sup> This aligns with his general opposition to the DREAM Act, a bill that would facilitate state efforts to allow certain undocumented students to attend college at in-state tuition rates and provide them with a path to citizenship.<sup>19</sup> Gov. Romney also defeated a moratorium on new charter schools.<sup>20</sup>

## What Romney might do

What Gov. Romney would do as president based on his Massachusetts record, is anyone's guess. You might conclude that he would continue to push for charter schools and merit pay, which he has. You might conclude that he would advocate for afterschool, early childhood, and English-only education, which he hasn't. Consequently, it is unclear from his campaign rhetoric exactly what core convictions he developed during his time in Massachusetts he still holds. That being the case, one has to wonder if Gov. Romney has decided only to run on part of his record rather than all of it.

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## Romney's flip flops and inconsistencies: What does he believe?

Gov. Romney has been in public office or seeking office pretty much since 1994 when he ran against Edward Kennedy for the U.S. Senate.<sup>21</sup> He has spoken on education enough times to build a history on the issue, but it is frustratingly hard to discern what his core beliefs are on some key concerns.

### Educating disadvantaged students

**Flip:** "Improving education for minority children is the civil rights issue of our era."<sup>22</sup>

**Flop:** "I'm very supportive of the Ryan budget plan."<sup>23</sup> The Ryan budget plan could cut funding for disadvantaged students by as much as \$2.7 billion and for special needs students by as much as \$2.2 billion.<sup>24</sup>

### Federal role in education

**Flip:** "We all believe government has a role in some things ... like overseeing our schools or some portion of our schools..."<sup>25</sup>

**Flop:** "We need to get the federal government out of education."<sup>26</sup>

### U.S. Department of Education

**Flip:** "I've taken a position where, once upon a time, I said I wanted to eliminate the Department of Education. That was my position when I ran for Senate in 1994. That's very popular with the base."<sup>27</sup>

**Flop:** “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.”<sup>28</sup>

**Flip:** “I would either consolidate the education department with another agency or make it a heck of a lot smaller.”<sup>29</sup>

## No Child Left Behind

**Flip:** “So I supported No Child Left Behind. I still do. I know there are a lot in my party that don’t like it, but I like testing in our schools.”<sup>30</sup>

**Flop:** Gov. Romney criticized then-presidential candidate, former Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA), for voting for No Child Left Behind, “He talked of this of being ‘taking one for the team.’ I wonder which team he was taking it for. My team is the American people, not the insiders in Washington.”<sup>31</sup>

## Race to the Top

**Flip:** “I think Secretary Duncan has done some good things,” referring to Race to the Top. “I hope that’s not heresy in this room.”<sup>32</sup>

**Flop:** “I’m not sure exactly what he’s saying,” Romney said, referring to Gov. Rick Perry’s (R-TX) charge that Gov. Romney supports Race to the Top. “I don’t support any particular program that’s he’s describing.”<sup>33</sup>

Where exactly does Mitt Romney stand? It’s hard to say. “There’s no way to tell if Romney’s heart is where it was in ‘08,” said Rick Hess, director of education policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. “The balance of forces has shifted on this issue, and he has clearly followed suit.”<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps Gov. Romney’s policies follow the “balance of forces” more than his own convictions.



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## Romney's VP pick: What is Paul Ryan's stance on education and what does it mean?

Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) does not have a lengthy record on education issues. Therefore, it is difficult to discern his position or beliefs. It is clear, however, that his approach to the federal budget would drastically cut investment in education. Similarly, his votes on education reveal someone willing to reduce federal protections for disadvantaged students.

### Education investment

Rep. Ryan's 2013 federal budget plan—"The Path to Prosperity"—would lower taxes on the wealthy and significantly cut spending for social programs.<sup>35</sup> He calls for cutting education, training, employment, and social services by 33 percent.<sup>36</sup> Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, told Congress he estimates the Ryan plan could cut as much as \$2.7 billion from Title I grants—resources for school districts with low-income students—and as much as \$2.2 billion from grants for special education. It could force as many as 100,000 children to lose access to Head Start, which helps prepare low-income students for school.<sup>37</sup> And the plan would make big changes and cuts to higher-education programs.<sup>38</sup>

Gov. Romney has said he is "very supportive" of the Ryan budget and thinks it would be "marvelous" if the Senate adopted it and passed it to the president.<sup>39</sup> By selecting Rep. Ryan as his running mate, Gov. Romney appears to endorse the Ryan plan more fully. Plus during the campaign Gov. Romney has been criticizing the Obama administration for increasing spending on education.<sup>40</sup>

### Ryan's record: Vouchers, cuts, and scale-back, oh my

Rep. Ryan has cast several votes on education issues since he was first elected to Congress in 1998, though most have been about higher education.<sup>41</sup> He voted for the No Child Left Behind Act, several revisions to Head Start, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, and maintaining lower interest rates on student loans. The last vote, taken this year, represents a flip-flop or a compromise, since his budget plan opposed such a use of federal funds.<sup>42</sup>

He has supported other education bills that made it to the floor of the House, including a bill to expand high-quality charter schools, a bill to fund the DC Opportunity Scholarship (voucher) program, and a 2003 bill to fund teacher-preparation and training programs. His congressional webpage says he also supports a bill—the Academic Partnerships Lead Us to Success Act—that would strip protections away from disadvantaged children.<sup>43</sup> The bill would allow states to consolidate funding dedicated for historically disadvantaged students, and it would prevent the Secretary of Education

from holding states accountable for student achievement results until three years after receiving federal funds.

This approach matches Rep. Ryan's overall voting record that has favored policies that make it more difficult for low-income, high-poverty students to succeed.<sup>44</sup> Rep. Ryan, for example, opposed the DREAM Act and has opposed implementing regulations that would regulate for-profit universities to curb predatory marketing practices. Additionally, he opposed a 2009 amendment to the healthcare bill that closed a loophole in a student lending program that helped pay for increased investment in Pell grants, which provide assistance for low-income students to attend college.<sup>45</sup>

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## Conclusion

Gov. Romney's plan to improve education lacks the detail and depth the public should expect from a presidential candidate. His stance on this important issue lacks the conviction, consistency, and comprehensiveness required to tackle the serious problems facing our nation's schools. Moreover, his choice of a running mate fails to clarify what a Romney administration would do to turn around low-performing schools or better the lives of disadvantaged students—other than slashing funds and turning what remains into vouchers and block grants that lack accountability to taxpayers. This is not a sufficient approach to governing. For the past six years Gov. Romney has been running for president and it is time for him to buckle down, revise his draft, and submit a more detailed education plan. American voters deserve nothing less.

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## Endnotes

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- 39 See Burns, "Romney Endorses Ryan Budget"; "Romney urges GOP to focus on Obama; president says today's party wouldn't select Reagan," *Associated Press*, April 3, 2012, available at [http://blog.al.com/wire/2012/04/romney\\_urges\\_gop\\_to\\_shift\\_focu.html](http://blog.al.com/wire/2012/04/romney_urges_gop_to_shift_focu.html).
- 40 Romney often says that spending on education has not yielded better results. For example, his education plan laments, "Politicians have attempted to solve these [achievement gap] problems with more spending. But while America's spending per student is among the highest in the world, our results lag far behind. Higher spending rarely correlates with better results." See "A Chance for Every Child," pp. 7-8.
- 41 See Project Vote Smart, "Representative Paul D. Ryan's Voting Record: Education," available at <http://votesmart.org/candidate/key-votes/26344/paul-ryan/27/education>.
- 42 See Nelson, "Ryan's Higher Ed Record."
- 43 See "H.R. 2514: A PLUS Act," available at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hr2514#>.
- 44 See Kate Pennington, "Why Paul Ryan's Budget Makes It Harder For Low-Income Students To Succeed," *Think-Progress*, August 15, 2012, available at <http://thinkprogress.org/education/2012/08/15/692731/paul-ryan-education-plan/>.
- 45 Project Vote Smart, "Representative Paul D. Ryan's Voting Record: Education."