WHAT MATTERS MOST

Americans voted for pathways to a better life

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The midterm elections were a rebuke of the corruption, cruelty and cost-of-living crisis of the Trump era—and of a president who cares about only himself, not everyday Americans. A powerful sea change swept over the states. One of the issues animating that change was public schools; Americans want them strengthened, not abandoned. Voters across the nation rejected the defunding of schools and the far-right's culture wars and privatization agenda.

Texas' governor-elect, Gina Hinojosa, whose commitment to public education is the reason she entered politics, laid out why: "There can be no American Dream without strong public schools."

In race after race, candidates triumphed who support public schools and recognize the escalating threats posed by private school vouchers—statewide in Iowa, Michigan, Ohio and Texas, and in countless congressional districts and school board races.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in key gubernatorial races.

In Arizona, whose disastrous voucher program has hurt students in public schools and has been a fiscal catastrophe, incumbent Katie Hobbs ran on increasing funding for public education and vetoed legislation that would have opted Arizona in to the Trump voucher plan. Her opponent campaigned on expanding vouchers and tax credits. Hobbs won.

In Ohio, where the massive cost of the voucher program siphons resources from students in public schools, Amy Acton ran on supporting public schools with a fair school-funding plan and restricting vouchers. Her opponent sought universal vouchers to include private schools and homeschooling without income caps. Acton won.

In Kansas, Cindy Holscher made fully funding public schools and opposing vouchers central to her campaign. Her opponent championed vouchers and so-called school choice. Holscher won this race.

And in Texas, Hinojosa ran on a pro-public education platform and defeated incumbent Greg Abbott in a clear rejection of his efforts to voucherize Texas schools. Hinojosa and other Texas candidates with backgrounds in education—including Sen.-elect James Talarico and numerous candidates for the state Legislature—won their races just 18 months after Abbott rammed through a $1 billion private school voucher program.

Democrats—who flipped at least six governorships, eight U.S. Senate seats, more than 40 House seats and at least 12 state legislative chambers—now have a clear mandate from voters to reject the Trump administration's private school voucher program, a grave threat to the public schools that serve nearly 90 percent of the nation's K-12 students.

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These pro-public education, pro-worker wins followed the most ambitious election program the AFT has ever undertaken. Our 1.875 million members organized and mobilized for months with the labor movement and allies to get out the vote and protect the vote. More than 500 AFT members ran for office, from school board to governor and Senate.

The AFT's election program spanned 31 states, ending with AFT leaders and members participating in a huge get-out-the-vote effort that included an AFTvotes bus traveling to 19 states and Washington, D.C., in 21 days.

The union vote was a record 15 percent share of the overall electorate, and union voters backed endorsed candidates by +20 points.

The outcome was simply too big to rig, but the results are not solely a rebuke of Trump. Americans want pathways to a better life. That starts with reversing Trump's cuts to healthcare, food assistance and student debt programs, but it must also include putting more money in people's pockets; fixing broken immigration and healthcare systems; broadening rights for workers; expanding affordable housing, healthcare and childcare; strengthening retirement benefits; protecting fundamental freedoms, rights and safety; and taking on grift, cronyism and wealth inequality. In the new era of artificial intelligence, we must establish responsible safeguards that protect workers, students and society. And to deal with the corruption that has plagued Washington, we need real ethics reforms and must get money out of politics. Presidents should use their office to benefit the public, not as a bottomless personal piggybank.

I have heard from so many people who are both hopeful and determined to get things done. These new leaders entered politics driven not by grand ambitions of wielding gavels or residing in governors' mansions, but by wanting to make a difference. Like the mom whose political journey started with a fight to save her son's elementary school. The county health director who strived to improve air and water quality. The physician who guided her state through the pandemic. And the candidates from different walks of life who are united by the desire to make every public school what it should be—a safe and welcoming place where parents want to send their kids, where educators want to work and, most importantly, where kids thrive. That's the foundation for the American Dream.



Weingarten, right, with Texas AFT President Zeph Capo and Texas Gov.-elect Gina Hinojosa at a campaign event in McAllen, Texas, Oct. 26.

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