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Mitt Romney's Blueprint for Privatizing American Education

by [Diane Ravitch](#)

On 23 May, the Romney campaign released its education policy [white paper](#) titled A Chance for Every Child: **Mitt Romney's** Plan for Restoring the Promise of American Education. If you liked the George W Bush administration's education reforms, you will love the Romney plan. If you think that turning the [schools](#) over to the private sector will solve their problems, then his plan will thrill you.

The central themes of the Romney plan are a rehash of Republican education ideas from the past 30 years, namely, subsidizing parents who want to send their child to a private or religious school, encouraging the private sector to operate schools, putting commercial banks in charge of the federal student loan program, holding teachers and schools accountable for students' test scores, and lowering entrance requirements for new teachers. These policies reflect the experience of his advisers, who include half a dozen senior officials from the Bush administration and several prominent conservative academics – among them, former Secretary of Education Rod Paige and former Deputy Secretary of Education Bill Hansen, and school choice advocates John Chubb and Paul Peterson.

Unlike George W Bush, who had to negotiate with a Democratic Congress to pass No Child Left Behind, Romney feels no need to compromise on anything. He needs to prove to the Republican party's base – especially evangelicals – that he really is conservative. And this plan is "mission accomplished".

Romney offers full-throated support for using taxpayer money to pay for private-school vouchers, privately-managed charters, for-profit online schools, and almost every other alternative to public schools. Like Bob Dole in 1996, Romney showers his contempt on the teachers' unions. He takes a strong stand against certification of teachers – the minimal state-level requirement that future teachers must pass either state or national tests to demonstrate their knowledge and/or skills – which he considers an unnecessary hurdle. He believes that class size does not matter (although he and his children went to elite private schools that have small classes). Romney claims that school choice is "the civil rights issue of our era," a [familiar theme](#) among the current crop of education reformers, who now use it to advance their efforts to privatize public education.

When it comes to universities, Romney excoriates Obama for the rising cost of [higher education](#). He claims that more federal aid leads to higher tuition, so he offers no new federal funding to help students burdened with debt. His plan does not mention the fact that tuition has increased in public universities (which enroll three-quarters of all students) because states have [reduced their investments in higher education](#) and shifted the burden from taxpayers to students. Romney will encourage private-sector involvement in higher education, by having commercial banks again serve as the intermediary for federal student loans – an approach Obama had eliminated in 2010 as too costly. (Until 2010, banks received guaranteed subsidies from the federal government to make student loans, while the government assumed nearly all the risk. When the program was overhauled by the [Obama administration](#), billions of dollars in bank profits were [redirected](#) to support Pell Grants for needy students.) To cut costs, Romney encourages the proliferation of for-profit online universities.

The Romney education plan says that no new money is needed because more spending on schools will not fix our problems. However, he proposes to dedicate more taxpayer money to the priorities that he favors, such as vouchers, charter schools, and online schools. He also wants more federal money to reward states for "eliminating or reforming teacher tenure and establishing systems that focus on effectiveness in advancing student achievement". Translated, that means Romney is willing to hand out money to states if they eliminate due process rights for teachers and if they pay more to teachers whose students get higher scores on standardized tests and get rid of teachers whose students do not.

In making the case for vouchers – which provide government funding to pay the tuition at any private or religious school that parents choose – Romney exaggerates the evidence; indeed, some of his claims are simply false. He points to the DC voucher program, which began in 2004, the first program to use federal tax dollars to subsidize private-school tuition – as "a model for the nation". He **asserts** that "after three months, students [in the DC voucher program] could already read at levels 19 months ahead of their public-school peers."

This is flatly wrong. A congressionally-mandated evaluation of the DC program found that students with vouchers made no gains in either reading or math. As the report stated:

"[T]here is no conclusive evidence that the OSP [Opportunity Scholarship Program] affected student achievement."

Romney claims that 90% of voucher students graduated from high school, as compared to only 55% in the low-performing public schools of DC. But here, he exaggerates. The federal evaluation of the program said that 82% of the students receiving vouchers graduated from high school, as compared to 70% of the students who applied to the voucher program and were not accepted. This is a respectable gain, but nowhere near as large as the numbers Romney cited. Because students who enter a lottery tend to be more motivated than those who do not, reputable social scientists usually compare the outcomes of those who won the lottery and those who did not.

Paradoxically, Romney's campaign takes credit for the fact that Massachusetts leads the nation in reading and mathematics on the federal tests known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress. But Romney was not responsible for the state's academic success, which owes to reforms that are entirely different from the ones he is now proposing for the country. Signed into law a full decade before Romney began his tenure as governor in 2003, the Massachusetts Education Reform Act involved a commitment by the state to double state funding of public education from \$1.3bn in 1993 to \$2.6bn by 2000; to provide a minimum foundation budget for every district to meet its needs; to develop strong curricula for subjects such as science, history, the arts, foreign languages, mathematics, and English; to implement a testing program based on the curriculum (because of costs, the state tested only reading and math); to expand professional development for teachers; and to test would-be teachers. In the late 1990s, again before Romney assumed office, the state added new funds for early childhood education.

Romney's plan, by contrast, is animated by a reverence for the private sector. While little is said about improving or spending more on public education, which is treated as a failed institution, a great deal of enthusiasm is lavished on the innovation and progress that is supposed to occur once parents can take their federal dollars to private institutions or enroll their child in a for-profit online school. Massachusetts attained success by raising standards for new teachers, not by lowering them. Nor did Massachusetts eliminate teacher tenure – that is, the right to a hearing for experienced teachers before they can be fired.

Higher education, we are assured, will flourish when "innovation and skill attainment" matter more than "time in classroom". Put in plain English, the last sentence is claiming that higher education will become more affordable when more students enroll in online universities, most of which are low-cost and for-profit. Of course, online universities are cheaper; they have no capital costs, no library, no facilities, and minimal staff. Some are **under investigation for fraud** because of their methods of recruiting students; they have fended off federal regulation by a heavy (and bipartisan) **investment in lobbying**.

The Obama administration's **first response** to Romney's proposals was to scoff and say that Obama's K-12 policies had the enthusiastic support of prominent conservative Republican governors, such as Chris Christie of New Jersey and Susana Martinez of New Mexico. Unfortunately, this is true. Apart from vouchers and the slap at teacher certification, Obama's Race to the Top program for schools promotes **virtually everything** Romney proposes – charters, competition, accountability, evaluating teachers by student test scores. If anything, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been as outspoken on behalf of charters and test-based accountability as Mitt Romney. And, like Romney, Duncan has disdained the issue of reducing the number of students per teacher.

Romney's proposal for private-school vouchers is red meat for the rightwing base of the Republican party, especially evangelicals. Vouchers have been the third rail of education politics since Milton Friedman proposed them in 1955; they have been put before the voters in several state referenda and have been consistently rejected. As a general rule, the public does not want public money to support religious schools. And many religious schools are wary about accepting public money and the regulations that eventually are tied to it. But in the past few years, vouchers have been revived by state legislatures in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Louisiana without resorting to a popular vote.

The results are already troubling. In Louisiana, where Governor Bobby Jindal's education reform legislation was enacted in mid April, the new law declares that students in low-performing schools are eligible to take their share of state funding to any accredited private or religious school. About 400,000 students (more than half the students in the state) are eligible, but only some 5,000 places are available in the state's private and parochial schools. When the state posted the list of participating schools, the one that registered to accept the largest number of voucher students was the New Living Word School, which offered to enroll 315 of them. But its current enrollment is 122, and it has **no facilities or teachers** for the new students, though it promises to erect a new building in time for the beginning of the school year this fall. Most of its instruction is delivered on DVDs.

Another school, the Eternity Christian Academy, which currently has 14 students, has agreed to take in 135 voucher students. According to a recent **Reuters article**:

"[Students] sit in cubicles for much of the day and move at their own pace through Christian workbooks, such as a beginning science text that explains 'what God made' on each of the six days of creation. They are not exposed to the theory of evolution."

The pastor-turned-principal explained:

"We try to stay away from all those things that might confuse our children."

Some of the other schools that have been approved to receive state-funded vouchers "use social studies texts warning that liberals threaten global prosperity; Bible-based math books that don't cover modern concepts such as set theory; and biology texts built around refuting evolution".

The Reuters reporter described the Louisiana law as "the nation's boldest experiment in privatizing public education, with the state preparing to shift tens of millions in tax dollars out of the public schools to pay private industry, businesses owners and church pastors to educate children". Next year, all students in Louisiana will qualify for a voucher to take courses from private vendors or corporations offering courses or training. Expect a boom in new education businesses in Louisiana.

What Governor Jindal is doing sounds like a template for the Romney plan. With no increase in funding, all the money for vouchers and private vendors and online charters will be deducted from the state's public education budget. Governor Jindal and Mitt Romney should explain how American education will be improved if taxpayer dollars are used to send more students to sectarian schools and to take their courses from profit-making businesses and online schools.

In the vision presented by Mitt Romney, public dollars would flow to schools that teach creationism. Anyone could teach, without passing any test of their knowledge and skills and without any professional preparation. Teachers could be fired for any reason, without any protection of their freedom to teach. In some states and regions, teachers will be fearful of teaching evolution or global warming or any controversial issues. Nor will they dare to teach books considered offensive to anyone in their community, like Huckleberry Finn.

And candidate Romney should explain how privatizing the way we school our children will further his goal of "restoring the promise of American education". "Restore" suggests a return to the past. When in American history did the for-profit sector run American schools? Which state ever permitted it until the advent in our own time of for-profit charter corporations and for-profit online corporations? Which founding fathers ever railed against public education? John Adams, that crusty conservative, said this:

"The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves."

Restoring the promise of American education should mean rejuvenating public schools, not destroying them.

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