

4-9-2014

Meet the Candidates: 2014 Arkansas Gubernatorial Race

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Citation

McKenzie, S. C., & Ritter, G. W. (2014). Meet the Candidates: 2014 Arkansas Gubernatorial Race. *Policy Briefs*. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/oepbrief/38>

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Quotes From the Candidates

“We need to return to giving more opportunity for students to select a career path that may not include a baccalaureate.”

~Curtis Coleman, Republican

“By 2025, I want every 4-year-old in Arkansas to have access to Pre-K...Other states, led by Democrat and Republican administrations, have made great strides in these areas...If we want our young people to grow up and be successful and competitive with other states and other countries for jobs, we have to do a better job with Pre-K.”

~Mike Ross, Democrat

“Education is about communities, voluntary organizations, and the whole state working together...My passion is job creation in this state, and we want to have the skilled workforce and college graduates that make sure we can build a strong economy in Arkansas.”

~Asa Hutchinson, Republican

Meet the Candidates: Arkansas Governor’s Race

Earlier this spring, we at the OEP were fortunate to sit down with three of the candidates vying to become the next Governor of Arkansas. The candidates were generous enough to give us their time and allow us to post the full interviews on YouTube. If you prefer an abridged version, this policy brief summarizes the candidates’ views on a range of important education policy issues. We hope that these interviews will be informative for your vote on May 20th in the party primaries.

Introduction

Every four years, Arkansans step into the voter’s booth and cast their ballot for who should be the chief executive of the state for the next four years. That time is quickly approaching again, as primaries for different party nominations take place on May 20, 2014, and the general election will occur on November 4, 2014. The position of Governor of Arkansas can have a sizable impact on the direction of education in Arkansas, especially since the governor appoints the Arkansas Commissioner of Education, who leads the Arkansas Department of Education, and State Board of Education members.

It follows that the views of the respective candidates should be known for all potential voters to access and understand. For this reason, we have chosen

This Brief

Introduction **P.1**

Interviews with the Candidates **P.2**

Conclusion **P.4**

to present a long-form interview with each candidate answering questions on individuals from different sides of the political aisle, developed a uniform set education policy in the state of Arkansas. A panel from our office, representing individuals from different sides of the political aisle, developed a uniform set of questions for the series, spanning the education spectrum from pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) to higher education. Although not comprehensive, we hope that these questions are able to inform voters on how these individuals would lead the education system of our state.

Interview Format

In our interviews, we asked the candidates nine questions about their views on relevant education policy issues. Due to time constraints, not all of the candidates were able to answer every question; in this policy brief, we report each question exactly as it was asked to the candidates, and then have selected a quote from the full response of each candidate in its best form. We hope that this side-by-side presentation will help readers compare the policy positions of each candidate. The candidates’ responses are presented alphabetically by their last name, with the following abbreviations used: Curtis Coleman as “CC”; Asa Hutchinson as “AH”; Mike Ross as “MR.”

THE CANDIDATES

Curtis Coleman, Republican

www.curtiscoleman.com

[YouTube interview](#)



Asa Hutchinson, Republican

www.asaforgovernor.com

[YouTube interview](#)



Mike Ross, Democrat

www.mikeroos.com

[YouTube interview](#)



Dr. Lynette Bryant, Democrat

www.votedobryant.com

Joshua Drake, Green Party

www.greenpartyofarkansas.org

Frank Gilbert, Libertarian

www.electfrankgilbert.com

Interviews with the Candidates

The candidates responded to questions related to Pre-K, college access, education and the economy, and a few others in between.

Pre-K Expansion

As of late, there has been a push to provide Pre-K education for all students. Does this policy goal, or a form of it, fit into your agenda, and if so, where would the funding come from?

CC: “I need to see some more convincing data on Pre-K education effectiveness, and I have seen everything from lack of data to contradictory data...I need to see more data about the efficiency of Pre-K programs.”

AH: “There is a need in impoverished areas of the state for increased support for Pre-K education, getting that child ready to learn. We need to continue to measure this; there is initial success and increased learning capacity when you have that early access to education.”

MR: “By 2025, I want every four year old in Arkansas to have access to Pre-K...Other states, led by Democrat and Republican administrations, have made great strides in these areas...If we want our young people to grow up and be successful and competitive with other states and other countries for jobs, we have to do a better job with Pre-K.”

Teacher Quality

There is consensus among education researchers—who famously disagree on many issues—that teacher quality is one variable that has a great impact on student learning. What can Arkansas do to recruit the most talented individuals into the profession of teaching and then retain them? What will your administration do to encourage teacher quality?

CC: “We are not letting our teachers teach. They are spending 40% of their day filling out paper work, and they are frustrated by that because it is not what they signed up to do... They feel called to teach – it’s a mission for them – but they don’t feel like they are getting a chance to teach.”

AH: “While teachers are motivated appropriately, we do need to reward them. We need to, one, pay our teachers a good salary, and secondly, we need to make the classroom as supportive of our teachers as possible – we give them flexibility, allowing them to use innovative ideas in teaching, and we try to minimize the paperwork burden on them.”

MR: “It is an enormous responsibility we are putting on these teachers, and teachers really will play an important role in what the future of Arkansas looks like...I don’t believe there is a greater calling to public service than those who teach our children. We need to recognize that in terms of quality and pay.”

Charter Schools

Arkansas has seen growth in the number of charter schools over the past decade – all in different configurations and sizes. What is the role of school choice in Arkansas, and do you envision any changes for this portion of our education system?

CC: “We have a poverty problem in Arkansas that includes issues related to education...I want to see Arkansas give every parent the equal opportunity and the equal liberty to choose to put their children in the very best schools and get the very best education possible.”

AH: “We will see continued opportunities for specialized education. It can be in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) arena or in the Arts... They can meet the needs of the students in their area... This will just simply make our traditional public schools better.”

MR: “I think parents should make the best decision for their own children. If we are going to have charter schools, let’s make sure we have charter schools for their original intent: to innovate and share successes with the rest of the state. To go out and try to do things differently, and if they work, then bring those experiences back to the traditional public schools.”

Education Leadership

Part of the job description for the next Arkansas Governor is appointing leaders over the Arkansas education infrastructure. What are the qualities that you would look for in appointing an Education Commissioner or a State Education Board member?

CC: *Mr. Coleman did not get to this question in the limited time frame.*

AH: “For the Commissioner, there are two criteria. One, they can effectively lead the education department – making sure they can run their staff efficiently, using tax payer dollars wisely. And second, their philosophy – they understand competition amongst our schools, high standards in education, and transparency for parents to understand how schools are performing.

MR: “My appointments to the Education Board will not be political. They will be based on who is most qualified and who is willing to serve. We do not need ideologues; we need pragmatic problem-solvers. When

folks stop listening to each other, I believe it stymies educational progress.”

Technology in Education

The divide between education and technology seems to narrow each day, yet all Arkansas students are not connected to the necessary infrastructure to take advantage of these innovations. How can Arkansas prepare her students to participate in the new economy, and what steps should be taken to connect all students to the broadband network?

CC: “Moving outside the scope of just education, broadband access to all of Arkansas’ rural communities is absolutely essential to a vital Arkansas economy and especially for the opportunity for our students to become entrepreneurs and build our economy.”

AH: “Private sector providers are going to provide the backbone for our high-speed networks...it’s a shared responsibility between the state and the local school districts. Again, I hope the private sector can provide an extra lift, particularly with those areas of the state that are struggling with matching funds.”

MR: “I look forward to working with Democrats and Republicans in a bipartisan way to ensure that every student and every school in Arkansas is adequately connected. Just like we used to talk about ports, rivers, interstate highways, and airports, a critical part of our infrastructure today is ensuring that every child in this state has access to broadband.”

College Access

Over the past several years, we have seen the gradual lowering of tuition awards from the Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarship, also known

as the Lottery Scholarship. What can the state do to encourage college preparedness and college access?

CC: “We cannot afford to make high schools simply college preparatory schools. We are pushing some of our students out of high school because we are not giving them choices that reflect their own individuality.”

AH: “Incentives and innovative thinking can help our students to have affordable degree programs. We need to continue to keep higher education at an affordable cost, and to allow access to everybody that desires to go to college.”

MR: “I will strive to fully fund the Governor’s Distinguished Scholarship, to get the best and brightest students to remain in Arkansas, through college and beyond. We need to increase awareness of our two year colleges across the state, for students to be college and career ready.”

How do we compare?

How well are Arkansas schools performing today compared to schools across the nation? Where have we shown improvement and what areas need greater attention? How do we keep students from needing remediation at the next education level?

CC: “I think one of the things we need to be careful about is that we don’t create so many programs and standards with which public school teachers and administrators have to comply that they are overwhelmed. In the process, the most fundamental skills, such as reading, math, science, and basic cognitive skills are wiped out or minimized.”

AH: “It is the responsibility of the legislature to fund our [schools] and the private sector to support

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education in our state. In terms of remediation...first, we need to have a strong plan for students to get to grade level. Second, we need to hold our schools accountable in terms of their performance...There should be financial rewards for those that reduce remediation.”

MR: “Too many students don’t finish college. College remediation still costs the state about \$43 million per year. There is a lot of room to grow and improve, and we have to do a better job at getting our young people college and career ready.”

Future Reforms

While we have tried to hit on some of the big issues that we have seen around the state, are there any other reform ideas that you think should be explored, studied, or moved toward implementation during your administration?

CC: “We need to return to giving more opportunity for students to select a career path that may not include a baccalaureate.”

AH: “Not everyone will choose to go to college – we need to have a quality education for every student, including the core skills. But we have to recognize that some will choose to be in the skilled workforce, not requiring a four year degree, but something more than high school...We want to make sure our money going toward career education is used effectively.”

MR: “I would like to see more innovation in the classroom. This will be essential moving forward. We need to empower teachers, principals, administrators, and parents to be able to innovate more and to try new ways of teaching.”

Education and the Economy

We know that our education system serves as the foundation for Arkansas’ future, so it is not a reach to say that our K-12 system and higher education are closely connected to all Arkansas policy. In closing, are there any other parts of your political platform that you feel connect to providing the best education to Arkansas students?

CC: “We have a critical skill labor shortage in Arkansas...I am really concerned that we ... should not press every student into a four year college degree, while at the same time we have a block on our revitalization of Arkansas’ economy because we are not producing an adequate number of skilled craftsmen and tradesmen.”

AH: “Education is about communities, voluntary organizations, and the whole state working together...My passion is job creation in this state, and we want to have the skilled workforce and college graduates that make sure we can build a strong economy in Arkansas.”

MR: “My vision is pretty simple: I want every child in the state to grow up knowing and to have faith that if they do their very best in school, if they work hard, if they play by the rules, they can grow up to achieve their God-given potential. They should not have to leave Arkansas to do so.”

Conclusion

We hope that this interview series has been informative and helps in the decision making process for all who will be voting in the primaries soon. It is our hope that this long-form interview can provide context to the views of these candidates. We also encourage all to follow-up with these candidates by reading more about their policy positions on their websites.

To read a summary of the interviews and watch the interviews in their entirety, visit our [blog post](#): Meet the Candidates: Governor Candidates on Education Policy.