Over the past three decades, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has worked to expand access to early-childhood education, boost academic standards, and improve child health—but her track record of success is mixed.

1. Clinton was a big fan of early-childhood education before it became the “it” education issue.

   When she was first lady of Arkansas, Clinton spearheaded an effort to bring a program known as Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youth to the state. And as a U.S. senator from New York in 2007, she introduced the “Ready to Learn Act,” which would have created a new preschool program. She also pitched a universal pre-K program as a presidential candidate back in the 2008 campaign, and again in her current presidential bid.

2. Some in the education “reform” camp have been bothered by her campaign rhetoric, especially when it comes to charter schools.

   Clinton has long been a charter supporter. But she made waves earlier this year when she said charter schools don’t take the toughest students (unlike public schools, which have to take everyone). Since then, Clinton seems to be trying to rebuild her relationship with charters.

3. Clinton voted for the No Child Left Behind Act as a senator, and is now a big fan of its successor.

   Clinton supported the NCLB law back in 2001, but called for changes to it as a candidate in 2008. She was one of the first presidential candidates to congratulate Congress on passing the Every Student Succeeds Act, which replaced it. Clinton may have been caught off guard by the break with ESSA’s passage; now she won’t have to choose between unions and the “reform” wing of the Democratic Party on sticky issues like standardized testing.

4. She’s been endorsed by the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, but not all their members are so thrilled about it.

   Clinton got the backing of the AFT in the 2008 election. (The NEA didn’t endorse in that primary.) This time, the unions went in early for Clinton, who has long been skeptical of evaluating teachers based on test scores. But many of the unions’ members would rather have seen an endorsement for her rival, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders. Bernie Sanders, or at least a longer process to give the unions time to extract policy promises from Clinton.

5. Clinton is an unabashed supporter of the Common Core State Standards.

   In her earliest campaign appearances, Clinton voiced support for the common core. She worked to expand access to challenging courses when she served as first lady of Arkansas. In the Senate, she introduced a bill to create voluntary math and science standards, although it didn’t make it over the finish line.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders has touched on both K-12 and higher education issues in his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination.

1. Sanders voted against the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, but for its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act.

   His vote against the NCLB law was due to that law’s emphasis on standardized testing. But over the past few years, Sanders, like many other candidates, seems to have taken a slightly different tack when it comes to testing and accountability. He backed an amendment that would have beefed-up accountability in the Senate version of what became ESSA. And he got some blowback for that position from teachers’ union members across the country who support him. (The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have endorsed Clinton.)

2. He’s making some very big promises when it comes to access.

   It’s no secret that college access has been a bigger deal in the Democratic primary than just about any other education issue. Sanders arguably has the most far-reaching plans. He wants to make public college free for everyone, and pay for it by taxing “Wall Street speculators.”

3. Sanders has been skeptical of alternative routes into the teaching profession.

   When the Senate education committee considered an (ultimately unsuccessful) rewrite of the NCLB law in 2011, Sanders introduced an amendment that would have made it harder for alternative-route teachers, like those in Teach For America, to be considered “highly qualified.”

4. When it came to marquee competitive grants, President Barack Obama did not have a friend in Sanders.

   Even when Race to the Top was popular, at least among Democrats, Sanders had serious concerns about the program. The cumbersome application process, he argued, shortchanged rural states like Vermont.

5. Sanders has made educational equity a K-12 campaign theme.

   He doesn’t have the long-standing relationship with minority voters that his chief rival, Hillary Clinton, is said to have. But he’s trying to take on issues that are important to those communities. For instance, in his Senate run, he addresses opportunity gaps in K-12 education, noting that black students are far more likely to be suspended or taught by a first-year teacher than their white peers are. And he’s pitched moving away from property taxes to a more equal system of funding education. Plus, Sanders has talked about the power of education to combat crime. “It makes eminently more sense to invest in jobs and education than jail and incarceration,” he said at a campaign rally in Springfield, Mass., last year. He’s also said that government jobs could help dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush has among the longest records on K-12 of any politician in the country, never mind the GOP field. He’s helped set the national K-12 agenda—and generated plenty of controversy in the process.

1. Bush wants to go big or go home on school choice.

   Bush’s education plan is, essentially, school choice on steroids. It would allow students to consolidate some 40 federal education programs and use the money to offer low-income families with children under age 18 an annual Education Savings Account deposits of up to $2,500. States could also allow federal Title I funds for low-income students and federal money for special education to follow children to the school of their choice, including a private school. As governor of Florida he championed “Opportunity Scholarships” or vouchers (which were later struck down in court) and tax credits.

2. Bush is a fan of the Common Core State Standards.

   In late 2014, when the GOP primary was just getting started, Bush had an opportunity to back down from his support of the common core. He didn’t take it. Instead, he made it clear that he still supported the standards. States, he said, don’t have to stick with common core, but if they don’t, they need to have high standards. Bush’s rivals have attacked him over and over again for his support of the common core.

3. Bush is a school accountability hawk, with his own twist on what that means.

   During his No Child Left Behind era, which essentially gave schools a “pass or fail,” Bush sought what he thought of as a more-managed accountability system in Florida. He graded schools on an A through F scale. Later, through his nonprofit organization, the Foundation for Excellence in Education, Bush pushed other states to adopt the policy. He is also a big fan of the Every Student Succeeds Act, which turns much greater control of K-12 education to states and districts. As governor, he ended social promotion for 3rd graders.

4. Bush was an early fan of the use of alternative routes into the teaching profession and performance pay.

   In Florida, Bush pushed for tougher standards for educators, alternative routes for teachers, and merit pay. He later helped champion those policies, as well as data-driven instruction and evaluations based in part on student outcomes. And he made rewarding effective teachers a piece of his K-12 plan this year.

5. Bush took his education policy show on the road after his gubernatorial term ended.

   After serving as governor, Bush used the Foundation for Excellence in Education to help push states to enact rigorous standards, teacher evaluation through test scores, and expanded school choice. He advocated for more online learning. And he was the godfather of a group of state chiefs that supported many of those policies, Chiefs for Change.
The major party hopefuls still in the race as of last week boasted widely varied records and stances on K-12.

By Alyson Klein & Andrew Ujifusa

Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas epitomizes several Republican positions regarding education, particularly when it comes to the federal government’s role in public schools. He hasn’t made many waves when it comes to K-12 policy in the Senate, but he has backed notable legislation, while opposing the biggest K-12 bill to come down the pike in 15 years.

Cruz is no fan of the U.S. Department of Education. He’s one of several current or former Republican presidential candidates who’ve said they’d either consider drastic cuts to the Education Department, or abolish the agency outright. During one debate, in fact, when he was naming five federal agencies he’d like to eliminate, Cruz slipped up and forgot to mention the Education Department, instead naming the Department of Commerce twice. (He later corrected his error to include the Education Department.) Cruz pitched it as a broader plan to cut $50 billion in federal spending.

The Common Core State Standards? Imagine a world without them.

That’s pretty much what Cruz has to say about the standards. In his campaign kick-off speech at Liberty University last year, Cruz told the audience, “Instead of a federal government that seeks to dictate school curriculum through common core ... imagine repelling every word of common core.” It’s tough to square Cruz’s words with the fact that states, not the federal government, adopt academic standards.

Cruz to feds: Back off on accountability.

Earlier this year, Cruz, along with fellow GOP Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, co-sponsored the “A-plus” Act which would have allowed states to opt out of any federal accountability requirements altogether. Basically, whether it involves standards, curriculum, or assessments, Cruz doesn’t want the federal government anywhere near what states or districts want to do.

Cruz does not like the newest version of the federal K-12 education law.

When the Every Student Succeeds Act came up for a vote in the Senate, Cruz gave it a thumbs-down. The consensus view is that ESSA shifts more decisionmaking to state and local education officials, which he and other candidates want to see. But it keeps the testing mandates for grades 3 through 8 and high school, and puts certain requirements on states when it comes to K-12 oversight.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich is a budget hawk who actually boosted education funding as governor and—unlike some other Republican candidates—likes the Common Core State Standards.

First-term Florida Sen. Marco Rubio doesn’t have the K-12 record of other candidates, but he has staked out his positions on a number of hot-button education issues, from choice to work-force readiness.

When it comes to getting bang for the buck in education, Trump thinks America is doing a pretty shoddy job.

Trump at a rally in Tulsa, Okla., blasted U.S. schools for performing worse on international tests compared to their peers, including some from countries he told the audience “you’ve never heard of.” It’s true that on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), American students have not performed particularly well, although the majority of countries that outperform the U.S. are developed nations, not the “Third World” countries Trump referenced in his speech.

Trump opposes the Common Core State Standards.

He’s fond of calling them a “disaster,” and he attacked rival Jeb Bush in particular, for supporting them. In his victory speech after the New Hampshire GOP primary he declared: “We’re getting rid of common core. We’re going to get our children locally. We educate our children locally.”

Gun-free school zones don’t keep children safe, they endanger them, Trump says.

In a campaign speech in Burlington, Vt., Trump lambasted these zones, enacted through federal law in 1990, as “bait” for people who wish to do harm. He’s also said that teachers armed with guns could have prevented the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in 2012. He wants to get rid of gun-free zones in his first day in office, although he’d need the help of Congress to follow through on that pledge.

What else doesn’t help children, or education in general?

The U.S. Department of Education, Trump says. He’s called the department a “massive bureaucratic behemoth” and he’d consider getting rid of it. On one occasion, he said he’d at least consider slashing the department “way, way down.”

If you want to know about his beliefs about education beyond K-12, there’s Trump University.

As The Washington Post reporter Emma Brown wrote in 2015, Trump charged $35,000 for his courses on real estate development into offering a series of courses students could take to learn about the business. But Trump University wasn’t really a university at all. It was almost short-lived and targeted by multiple lawsuits contending that students were ripped off by Trump’s endeavor through misleading advertising.

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Ted Cruz

John Kasich

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