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**Subject:** Obama, GOP governors share many views on education

# Obama, GOP governors share many views on education

By KIMBERLY HEFLING

The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON — A funny thing is happening between President Barack Obama and many Republican governors when it comes to improving America's schools: They are mostly getting along.

After Obama spoke recently to the nation's governors, Louisiana GOP Gov. Bobby Jindal publicly praised the administration's efforts on education, and Virginia Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell said there was a lot of room for "common agreement" on fixing schools. Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam, another Republican, introduced Obama in September at the White House before the president announced that states could be freed from stringent rules under the No Child Left Behind law if they met certain conditions.

GOP Gov. Mitch Daniels freely credits Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan for helping to pave the way for a "tectonic" shift in education, including comprehensive law changes passed in his home state of Indiana last year that include the rigorous use of teacher evaluations and one of the nation's most expansive uses of vouchers to help parents send children to private schools.

Republican governors are unabashedly behind some of the most aggressive changes in education policy today, from Indiana to Florida, where Republican Gov. Rick Scott successfully pushed law changes to establish merit pay and eliminate tenure protections for new teachers, to Wisconsin, where Gov. Scott Walker seeks statewide screening of incoming kindergartners and requirements that elementary school teachers take a more rigorous licensing exam.

While Obama doesn't agree with all these actions, he and the governors have found common ground in a number of areas, including teacher evaluation systems with consequences, merit pay for teachers, holding teachers and schools more accountable for how much students learn, and charter schools, which are public schools run by an independent third party.

Obama's awarding of waivers from No Child Left Behind in exchange for a promise by states to improve how they prepare and evaluate students has been popular with many governors of both parties, as has been the opportunity to compete for billions of dollars in the administration's "Race to the Top" competition, which rewards states for pursuing policies Obama supports.

"In today's political world, where you can't get Republicans and Democrats to agree on anything hardly in Washington, I think that's one area where you have a lot of Republican governors that would say we don't agree with everything the president wants to do on education, but there are a lot of things we do," Haslam said in a phone interview.

For Republican governors, there are no worries about political allegiances to powerful teachers' unions whose members historically contribute to and volunteer heavily for Democrats' campaigns. In fact, many of their efforts have led to strong clashes with unions. Both New Jersey GOP Gov. Chris Christie and Jindal, for example, at times have called on a teachers' union president in their home state to resign because of comments the union president made.

While Obama still must tread carefully when dealing with teachers' unions, Joe Williams, executive director of Democrats for Education Reform, said Obama's never had a cozy relationship with them, so that has also freed him to advocate for changes on his own terms. And that's earned him some respect among Republican governors.

Christie, who is seeking changes in his state's tenure laws, said recently on CBS' "Face the Nation" that Obama's embrace of ideas historically opposed by teachers' unions is a "Nixon-to-China kind of moment," meaning Obama is acting in a way contrary to what is expected.

"We need a Democratic president to make these reforms in education to lead the way," Christie said.

Daniels said in a phone interview that because Obama and Duncan embraced many education positions that their labor allies oppose, "you see the evidence everywhere of people peeling off from the defense of the status quo and saying we've got to make these changes for the benefit of children."

Daniels added, "What that means, of course, is that the 'Hell, no' lobby has been increasingly isolated."

Daniels said that lobby includes not just teachers' unions, but organizations that represent school boards, superintendents and others in the education establishment reluctant to embrace change.

Obama, after months of portraying Republicans as obstacles to his more ambitious economic proposals, is seeking common ground with Republicans on education and on several more modest initiatives. Obama won an extension of a payroll tax cut with Republican support and has endorsed a legislative package assembled by House Republicans to help small businesses. Obama and House Republicans have also emphasized areas in which their energy policy agendas overlap, including easing some barriers to natural gas production, despite sharp differences over other ways to address energy self-sufficiency. Both sides also are working on infrastructure spending, especially a new highway bill.

One of the major areas of disagreement between Obama and the GOP governors in education is on the use of taxpayer-funded vouchers for private school. Many Democrats believe vouchers chip away at dollars critical to public schools, and the Obama administration opposes them.

Jindal, who is pushing for a new voucher program in his home state, said in a phone interview that while he supports many of Obama's education efforts, he does "strongly" disagree with the administration's position on vouchers. "As long as there are children trapped in failing schools, we need to provide parents with more choices and ensure them more opportunities," he said.

Another area of disagreement is on restricting collective bargaining rights employees — a high-profile issue supported by Republican governors in Ohio, Wisconsin and Indiana. The Obama administration opposes taking away these rights.

While some Republican governors support ending tenure protections for teachers, the Obama administration has said tenure should be made more meaningful so that it's based not just on years of time in the classroom but on proof that students are learning.

The drive by the governors is accelerated by several factors, including a growing body of evidence that many students simply aren't learning and that effective teachers can dramatically alter students' lifetime earnings, as well as the push in this tough fiscal environment to ensure all dollars are spent wisely. The bottom line, said Scott, is that there's a "direct tie between education and jobs."

It's not just Republican governors turning to education. Among the Democrats, Gov. John Hickenlooper in Colorado recently signed a bill to implement new teacher tenure rules and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo in recent weeks forged a deal on teacher evaluations.

Williams said in the '90s, there was a push for changes in education by governors, but it dried up. He says Obama gave the "mojo" back to governors.

Not all Republican governors are pleased with Obama's education policies. Some, like many Republicans in Congress, view Obama's efforts on education as federal overreach. Former GOP presidential candidate and Texas Gov. Rick Perry, for example, refused to have his state compete in the Race to the Top competition, saying it "smacks of a federal takeover of public schools."

After the president's speech to governors, in which Obama urged them to invest more state resources in education, South Carolina Republican Gov. Nikki Haley told reporters the meeting was "interesting and somewhat frustrating."

"My takeaway was here was a president who was saying we could be doing more on education, and here is a president that said give more money to education, but this is also a president that is not untying any of the strings that come with the federal

mandates," Haley said.

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