

OVERVIEW: Education Reform

The need for improvement in America's education system will be an important campaign issue in the 2008 presidential election. Among the wealthy nations, America's educational attainment for high school graduation is especially poor, with only 70% of students graduating nationwide. Furthermore, American teenagers are lagging behind other developed countries in a litany of academic subjects, from reading and science to mathematics. Because the quality of our public schools is crucial to the health of our economy, our competitive standing in the world, and the potential of millions of students nationwide, McCain and Obama will be pressed to provide a new framework for their commitment to better education in America.

Since the signing into law of the 2001 education bill No Child Left Behind, the policy debate has focused primarily on the validity of federally mandated testing as a tool for increasing educational attainment in public schools. Critics argue that mandated testing reduces the amount of classroom time that can be used for teaching traditional subjects like English and science, while spending valuable time preparing students for a test that has little practical value. It is also unclear if the federal government has fully funded the programs mandated in the law, leaving already cash-strapped public schools to stretch limited resources even further. Also, schools that fail to improve test scores up to federal standards face strict penalties, such as losing students who would be allowed to enroll in other schools, which critics argue only redistributes the problem without any actual solution.

The sharp increase in the cost of higher education, especially in public universities, is also likely to be an important campaign issue. Since 2003, the cost of attending college has risen nearly 40%, and is a concern for future college-bound students that have to balance their educational goals with mounting student loan debt. The average debt a college graduate incurs is nearly \$20,000, an enormous obstacle to those who would like to earn an undergraduate degree but do not have the financial resources to do so. This raises ethical and political questions like: Do all Americans have a right to a quality education? Do all American students have a right to try to attain the highest level of education that they are capable of achieving, including free or low-cost higher education?



OVERVIEW: Major Presidential Candidates' Positions on Education

Directions: This summary focuses on several significant issues within the larger campaign issue. For a more comprehensive description and rationale for their positions, use the Websites of the McCain and Obama campaigns cited in "Sources" below. After studying this issue through research and current events discussion, decide how you feel about each candidate's position for the four education issues. Go to the **Comparing presidential candidates** chart to record your viewpoint on the candidates' education policies. To help you decide, you can write an abbreviation next to each policy statement:

SA- strongly agree; **A-** agree; **SD-** strongly disagree; **D-** disagree; **N-** no opinion

Federal Government's Role in Education

John McCain supports:

_____ Parents choosing where their children attend school, including charter and private schools, and home schooling.

_____ Little change in the current federal government's role in education, with improvements made to No Child Left Behind law.

_____ Making math, science and computer science national priorities.

Barack Obama supports:

_____ Increasing federal government support of public education and child welfare: funding, pre-school, early childhood education, improved teacher education, and college loans.

_____ The basic goals of No Child Left Behind Law, but maintains this law has had limited success because of unfulfilled funding commitments, poor implementation by the U.S. Department of Education, and problems with the design of the law itself.

_____ Making math and science education a national priority.

Financial Support of Education:

John McCain supports:

_____ School vouchers: payments to parents of K-12 students who are attending private and charter schools. (The definition of charter school varies state-to-state.)

_____ Sending federal dollars directly to local schools, cutting back on red tape and saving administrative costs.

Barack Obama:

_____ Opposes school vouchers.

_____ Supports significantly increasing federal funding for many educational and children's programs: No Child Left Behind (if amended and re-authorized); student loans; early childhood and pre-school education and child-care services such as Head Start; after-school and summer programs; college scholarships and Pell Grants; teacher training and in-service programs.

_____ Favors the creation of the American Opportunity Tax Credit, "ensuring that the first \$4,000 of a college education is free for most Americans, making two-thirds of tuition costs free for most public and community college students."

Standards

John McCain supports:

_____ No Child Left Behind law with some changes, with more emphasis on every child's performance than group averages. This is only the beginning of education reform.

_____ High standards and accountability for all educators: teachers, administrators and teacher-education programs.

Barack Obama supports:

_____ Reforming No Child Left Behind by "improving the assessments used to track student progress to measure readiness for college and the workplace and improving student learning in a timely, individualized manner."

_____ Improving "No Child Left Behind's accountability system so that we are supporting schools that need improvement, rather than punishing them."

Programs to improve children's lives & learning

John McCain supports:

_____ Expanding virtual learning by reforming the "Enhancing Education Through Technology Program" to build new virtual schools and the development of online courses (mainly college).

_____ Programs for states that commit to expanding online education opportunities: K-12 education, advanced placement courses, online tutoring, homeschooling.

Barack Obama supports:

_____ Providing affordable, high-quality child care for working families.

_____ Expanding Early Head Start and Head Start programs.

_____ A Zero to Five Plan: critical support for needy young children and their parents, with emphasis on early care and education for infants, and urging states to have a similar program, leading to voluntary, universal pre-school.

_____ Programs to recruit, prepare, retain and reward America's teachers.

Other Issues Important to You:

Use the candidate's web sites cited below to learn their positions.

Issue: _____

Summarize the candidates' positions on this issue:

Sources:

Obama-McCain Comparisons at:

<http://www.obama-mccain.info/compare-obama-mccain-education-issue.php>

McCain campaign at: <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/issues>

Obama campaign at: <http://www.barackobama.com/issues>

Google Election Tools for Teachers at:

http://www.google.com/educators/elections_tools.html