



PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES SCORECARD

The official education reform analysis by The Center for Education Reform of the candidates did not include the records of the presidential candidates, a departure from past practice because we thought enough people knew where the candidates stood and that by exposing our audiences to the views of Senators McCain and Obama regularly throughout the election season, people had had enough.

Well, we were wrong. It appears hundreds of leading education reformers whose names and voices appear all over the media and in audiences left and right are not very clear about exactly how this nation's presidential election might impact education reform.

So, we're taking the liberty of putting our thoughts on this all in one place. In the interest of time, these are conclusions and are not here backed up by data, but data are available throughout our - and related - websites and we're always happy to respond more fully. For now, the most important thing is that the facts get out. Whatever the result of Tuesday's election, we believe education reformers will have a lot of work to do to grow and expand great educational opportunities for all children, though clearly one candidate's support for creating such opportunities is stronger than the other's.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

There is in the charter community a steady chorus that says the candidates virtually agree on this issue. The reality is that the candidates do not agree on this issue!

A candidate who supports charter schools should support - and push his colleagues in the states to support - strong laws that ensure, encourage and stimulate charter school growth. That can occur only when charter laws do not depend on school districts for approval, have full operational autonomy and are funded the same way other public schools are funded.

Senator Obama has not said he supports such laws. He says he supports doubling federal funding for "responsible charters", but whether that definition depends on local input of unions or school board approval remains to be seen. We know many in the Obama camp believe in strong laws, but they are not the ones whose views have prevailed in this campaign. The one bill he voted for as a state senator increased the cap, but also imposed union and additional regulations on charter schools.

The official website says that an Obama-Biden administration would provide expanded charter school funding only to states that improve accountability for charter schools, allow for interventions in struggling charter schools and have a clear process for closing failing schools. The reality is that every strong law in the nation has such processes in place and they are working, but they rely on authorizers and not on traditional state bureaucracies, which is what the Obama language would do once such a requirement is made at the federal level.

Finally, missing from charter liturgy in this camp is the concept that it's not standards alone, but parental choice, that should drive charter growth.

Senator McCain, on the other hand, is a believer that parental choice and high standards together can drive strong charter schools and that states, not Washington, are in the driver's seat when it comes to reform. McCain has consistently supported the growth of charter schools in Arizona -- a state with a very flexible, liberal charter law -- by backing candidates and elected officials constantly who support a strong, inviting law to establish charters. He has advocated for money following children, which is the ultimate equity (weighted student funding is a close relative). McCain talked about charters in his convention speech, and continues to do so all over the country and in the media. Obama's education ads are limited to a focus on early childhood education, turning the TV off and more resources.

Oh, and doubling funding for charters in Washington doesn't create strong supply. Only strong laws can do that. In the absence of new charters, that money will be spent by state education agencies in 'charter-lite' arrangements with districts.

Obama's ability to influence the growth of strong charters in the states will depend much on how much he is willing to say that strong laws matter. He'll also have to show us that he's willing to punish Governors like Ohio's Ted Strickland who has worked hard to stop charters in their tracks in his state. If the standard bearer for a party allows their own party leaders in states to take a pathetic stand on reform, their access to the party's benefits should be cut off.

VOUCHERS

McCain is a voucher fan and believes competition is one answer. He thinks parent demand and satisfaction are important data points and that empirical evidence isn't necessary to allow poor parents to choose private schools with money following them to that school.

Obama is not a fan, does not see that data suggests it works for more than a few kids and would likely not support continued expansion of the D.C. program (one example) if his Democratic leaders in Congress didn't want it.

PERFORMANCE PAY FOR TEACHERS

Obama says he supports more pay for teachers and paying teachers differently. He has told public audiences in the past that he supports programs like that of the Denver Public School System which are negotiated with the union, and district-supported merit pay plans. Digging deeper, the campaign material outlines a federal program that would provide incentive money to districts that “design innovative recruitment and compensation systems” which pay teachers more for a series of additional duties and success.

There are two issues with this approach - the first is that any federal program requires regulation, and that regulation is influenced not by a president but by countless interest groups. Eventually it gets implemented by a Department of Education that even under the best circumstances takes the teeth out of anything meaningful. The public charter school grants program is a perfect illustration. Despite being written and passed to encourage policymakers to adopt strong laws and to reward them with money for schools in such environments, it has become like an entitlement where any state that calls a law “charter” qualifies for funding.

The second issue with the teacher pay plan that Obama recommends is it ignores the fact that districts do not make meaningful changes in teacher quality because they are typically constrained by union politics. The Chancellor of Washington D.C.'s school system, Michelle Rhee, has for months attempted to make significant changes in teacher hiring, firing and pay but has been thwarted at every turn by legislators and unions who oppose removing iron clad job protection. Obama's proposal does not help Michelle Rhee, but it does help districts hide with a cloak of reform behind not so significant teacher “bonus” programs.

McCain believes that administrators like Michelle Rhee need the control to make hard decisions about teachers. He has numerous proposals that, like those of Obama, are targeted at opening the door for more and high quality teachers through TFA or similar programs. McCain also believes that existing monies for teachers at the federal level should be re-focused on incentive bonuses for high performing teachers in challenging environments. There are not a lot of new programs in this arena but there is an attempt to shift federal dollars to districts that offer substantial changes in efforts to reward teachers. It's also clear that McCain would not have to appease union leaders as he does not have their endorsements.

NCLB

Much can be said about the two candidates on this issue but their positions seem to align closely to the positions shared by the Congressional leadership in their parties.

McCain believes NCLB was a necessary step, but would prefer more of the decision-making for how and when to hold schools accountable remain at the state level. His administration could be expected to continue strong accountability for federal spending.

Obama believes NCLB needs funding first and more flexibility for states. He's responsive to concerns by school districts that complain of the added oversight. It's not clear he recognizes, as does McCain, that NCLB has had an impact on the public's understanding of the crisis in education and on student achievement among poor and minority students.

POLITICAL REALITIES

People are Policy

There's an old saying in Washington that people are policy. Who you bring on to implement your policies is critical to success. People who advise you ensure that their own point of view is stamped on your administration.

When it comes to the people who surround these two candidates, many reformers - even Obama insiders - are highly critical of Obama's chief education advisor, Linda Darling-Hammond. While they disregard the criticism and suggest that it's Obama in the end who'll make the decision, it's clear that on every issue relating to education, Darling-Hammond is far from a reformer. She has a clear and proud record of supporting the existing track for training and paying teachers, and believes governance changes - like charter schools -- are a side issue.

Yes, there are young, wise and fresh people who also have been invited in from time to time to speak on Obama's behalf, and to show people in the know that he does have an open mind outside of the establishment. But they are not the ones who will prevail past Election Day. It is the party insiders and those who have held the titles that make the most difference.

McCain has several former state and federal education leaders in his camp. Phil Handy is the republican State Board of Education chairman who helped Jeb Bush put through his multi-tiered education package, which included accountability, choice and more resources. Lisa Graham Keegan is a well-known commodity in the education reform world, having led Arizona's reforms as well as working on the national level. Former Pennsylvania Secretary of Education and Deputy U.S. Secretary of Education Gene Hickok is also involved. These are people who unequivocally know what good laws look like and how people can influence a candidate.

Other Voices

There are individuals fully engaged in education today who understand the power of words and of people. Paul Vallas, once CEO of Chicago schools, then in Philadelphia and now in New Orleans, told his local paper that “schools would be the winners if Congress adopts parts of both Barack Obama's and John McCain's education platforms. Vallas said he likes Obama's plan to dramatically increase early childhood education... He also praises McCain's plan for more school choice, alluding to his support, rare among school administrators, for charter schools and private school vouchers such as those approved recently for New Orleans by the Louisiana Legislature at Gov. Bobby Jindal's urging.”

The Center for Education Reform is a non-partisan, non-profit organization and provides this voter's guide as a public service to voters. The Center for Education Reform does not endorse individual campaigns or candidates.