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## What the Education Platforms Say and Don't Say

by UCLA IDEA

Republicans and Democrats have nominated their candidates for president and vice president and adopted platforms to guide their policy agendas. Party platforms rarely spell out specific policy actions and this is especially true for education. But, sprinkled throughout the lofty rhetoric are clues, nuances and an occasional stark difference in what we can expect from either party's election. Here, we look at some of those similarities and distinctions. For the full version of the platforms read the Republican *We Believe in America* and the Democrat's *Moving America Forward*.

Many platform provisions reveal cultural and ideological differences between the parties. Republicans, for example, speak out for abstinence education while Democrats are typically more tolerant of a comprehensive age-appropriate approach to sex education. Republicans support an "English First approach" which they believe will counter "divisive programs that limit students' ability to advance in American society." Although Democrats don't raise the issue of bilingual education, they are more inclined to support students' retention of their home language for both pedagogical and cultural reasons. Both parties want to give students more choices in the form of public school options, charters, magnets and teacher-led efforts, but Democrats oppose vouchers and tend to favor options within the public—not private—sector. Democrats are inclined to see the poverty that disproportionately affects communities of color as closely tied to educational achievement; Republicans make few explicit connections between poverty and students' success.

Republicans say "maintaining American preeminence requires a world-class system of education, with high standards, in which all students can reach their potential." Similarly, Democrats are "committed to ensuring that every child in America has access to a world-class public education so we can out-educate the world and make sure America has the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020" and "the President challenged and encouraged states to raise their standards so students graduate ready for college or career and can succeed in a dynamic global economy."

Both parties want equitable education, but neither offer specific policies to diminish the funding disparities between poor and wealthy communities. Republicans see good schools as the "greatest civil rights challenge of our time" and add: "A young person's ability to achieve in school must be based on his or her God-given talent and motivation, not an address, zip code, or economic status." Democrats consider education the surest path to the middle class, making it necessary to "close the achievement gap in America's schools and ensure that in every neighborhood in the country, children can benefit from high-quality educational opportunities."

Both parties favor higher or rising standards and accountability, but neither party addresses the role of standardized tests—indeed the word "test" does not appear in either party's platform. This silence is striking given the fact that standardized tests shape so much of the day-to-day activity within

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American schools as well as what the public learns about how well their schools are doing. It is not clear whether this silence reflects a) the parties' implicit commitment to testing as a strategy for school improvement, b) concern with the public's growing discomfort over how testing distorts the educational process, or c) a little of both.

The two parties simultaneously express great appreciation for America's teachers and a desire to improve or replace some in the teaching force. Republicans call for doing away with "rigid tenure systems" so as to "attract fresh talent and dedication to the classroom." They want a new definition of "Highly Qualified Teachers" that relies on "results in the classroom," in other words, a teacher evaluation system that focuses on student test scores. Democrats also speak to the importance of teacher evaluations, but emphasize providing support to struggling teachers and ensuring due process. Reflecting internal divisions within the party (which includes so-called "reform" advocates as well as many teachers), Democrats do not explicitly address the use of standardized tests being used to evaluate teachers.

The parties have different perspectives on the public's return on investment in public education. Republicans, incorrectly and somewhat illogically, said the "federal government has spent \$2 trillion on elementary and secondary education with no substantial improvement in academic achievement or high school graduation... clearly, if money were the solution, our schools would be problem-free." On the other hand, Democrats, somewhat narrowly, stress investments in terms of 400,000 educator jobs saved—and the potential to recruit new teachers to the field. "The President has laid out a plan to prevent more teacher layoffs while attracting and rewarding great teachers." That argument would be more complete if it were tied to the positive effects on student learning when schools are fully and competently staffed.

Regarding higher education, we find a clear policy distinction: Republicans don't believe the "federal government should be in the business of originating student loans." But Democrats tout the president's efforts to make college more affordable: "we doubled our investment in Pell Grant scholarships and created the American Opportunity Tax Credit worth up to \$10,000 over four years of college."

Although both parties believe that American education should be "world-class," neither platform dwells on the other purposes of public education: to develop the next generation of creative, civic-minded citizens. For example, neither platform anticipated President Obama's convention speech calling for citizenship as a national goal and responsibility for all Americans. What Obama calls "the very essence of our democracy" is also the very essence of public education:

*"But we also believe in something called citizenship — citizenship, a word at the very heart of our founding, a word at the very essence of our democracy, the idea that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another and to future generations."*

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