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Presidential Candidates on K-12 Education

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Every four years, our presidential candidates work hard to convince us that they have the best plan to keep us safe, prosperous, and well-educated. While economic challenges have recently taken center stage in the presidential election, education is still a critically important issue to OEP and its constituents. Here, we provide a summary of the views of each candidate on key issues and hope that this information is useful to our readers. In this brief, the OEP does not endorse one candidate over the other. Indeed, there is much to like in each candidate’s platform.



Senator Barack Obama



Senator John McCain

Standards and Accountability

Obama Platform

- Argues for improved assessment tools and more support – rather than sanctions – for failing schools
- Advocates for a broader range of assessments and for standardized exams that provide more valuable feedback

McCain Platform

- Advocates for higher standards and more accountability for schools
- Argues that testing data should focus more on individual student growth, rather than on simple averages of group performance

Teacher Quality and Teacher Pay

Obama Platform

- Favors performance pay for teachers, based on a system negotiated with teachers
- Favors scholarships for undergraduate and graduate students interested in teaching math or science
- Favors increase in base pay for all teachers and additional pay for mentor teachers
- Wants to expand mentoring programs and career ladder initiatives, such as “teacher residency programs”

McCain Platform

- Favors performance pay for teachers and additional pay for teachers in underperforming schools
- Argues that schools need freedom to end contracts with ineffective teachers
- Favors additional funds for recruiting high quality college students to enter the field of teaching
- Wants to provide funding for principals to pay for training for teachers in technology

Federal Education Funding

Obama Platform

- Supports the use of federal education dollars to prepare children from “zero to five”
- Supports college outreach programs for high school seniors
- Proposes dropout intervention programs, after school programs, and summer programs to support in-school learning
- Advocates increased federal funding to elementary and secondary education, and increased spending on research and development

McCain Platform

- Supports more federal education dollars given directly to schools and parents rather than being funneled through states and districts
- Supports the development of virtual schools and online course offerings
- Focus federal funding on the neediest children; reward successful Head Start programs with additional funds
- Maintains the current level of federal funding to elementary and secondary

Charter Schools/School Choice

Obama Platform

- Emphasizes the importance of holding charter schools accountable: Supporting charter schools that are succeeding, shutting down the ones that are not meeting standards
- Proposes the expansion of non-profit child care, parenting, and education efforts, like the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York to other cities

McCain Platform

- Emphasizes the importance of choice for parents and competition between schools
- Favors more school-based management funding
- Proposes to expand the Opportunity Scholarship Program in Washington D.C., which is a voucher for more than 1,900 low-income students

Advisors

Obama Platform

- Advised on education by Melody Barnes, the Executive Vice President for Policy at the Center for American Progress, and a former chief counsel to Senator Edward M. Kennedy

McCain Platform

- Advised by Lisa Graham Keegan, the former superintendent for public education in Arizona and previously candidate for his secretary of education under President Bush

A brief perusal of the candidates’ platforms reveals the numerous similarities between the candidates on education policy. This is not surprising. Both candidates are working to attract voters, among their own party’s bases and among moderate voters. To do so, the candidates focus on popular and non-controversial issues (such as improved teacher quality) and shy away from divisive issues. For instance, both candidates have chosen to steer clear of much discussion of the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) law. While each has been willing to address key components of the law such as standards, accountability, and testing, each has also been hesitant to use the term NCLB or to provide much in the way of specific amendments. Perhaps this is because many voters have a negative view of NCLB, whether or not they have any knowledge of the law’s details!

In the end, while this election will certainly have an impact on education in Arkansas, it is important to keep in mind that state and local policymakers play a much greater role our community’s schools than do policymakers at the federal level. So, if you are interested in what happens in our schools, read up on the platforms of candidates for state legislative offices and local school board seats. Indeed, critical decisions affecting our K-12 schools – about testing, funding, facilities, and much more – will be made during the upcoming legislative session that begins in January 2009. Stay tuned!

For more information on the candidates’ views on education, visit articles from [Education Week](#) and [USA Today](#).