

Extra Feature Story

Obama, McCain Push Different Visions for Schools, Teachers and Students

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Democratic nominee Senator Barack Obama and Republican nominee Senator John McCain sparred over education policy this week, as the campaigns kept up a furious pace with just two months left in the race for the White House.

Education could be a deciding factor in the close race that has both candidates competing for independent and undecided voters.

The focus on education has been driven by Obama, who has been endorsed by both major teaching unions.

On September 10 he delivered a major education policy speech in the key election state of Ohio, calling for big increases in federal school spending and promising to replace ineffective teachers.

"We need a new vision for a 21st century education -- one where we aren't just supporting existing schools, but spurring innovation; where we're not just investing more money, but demanding more reform," Obama said.

Obama on teachers

Obama proposes rewarding effective teachers and teachers in underserved areas with salary incentives as well as recruiting new talented teachers, as does McCain.

Obama said he wants to train 30,000 highly qualified teachers a year, and expand mentoring programs matching new teachers with successful experienced teachers.

He developed a strongly held belief in the impact quality teachers can have on student achievement through his work on education projects and fundraising in Chicago, reported the New York Times.

The emphasis on teacher accountability has similarities to President George Bush's controversial No Child Left Behind education law, though Obama has proposed changes to that law and spoken out against the focus on teaching to standardized tests.

McCain's education priorities

McCain has praised the underlying goals of No Child Left Behind to close achievement gaps between minority and white children and increase accountability, but he has also proposed additional reforms to the education system.

"We need to shake up failed school bureaucracies with competition, empower parents with choice," McCain said during his nomination acceptance speech on September 4.

"Some may choose a better public school. Some may choose a private one. Many will choose a charter school. But they will have the choice, and their children will have that opportunity."

The idea of choice is central to McCain's education policy, which contains fewer new ideas than Obama's policy platform. He supports vouchers, which would allow parents to use money they would have paid to taxes for public education to pay for a private school education instead. Vouchers are controversial because they take money out of the public school system and give it to private schools, including religious schools.

It's an issue McCain has supported for many years, including during his run for the Republican nomination in 1999.

McCain has also said that he wants to develop "virtual schools" and curriculums, allowing students to take more online courses.

The candidates on charter schools

Both McCain and Obama support providing more money for college students and government efforts to fix student loan programs.

They also support charter schools -- public schools that are free from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Charter schools are free to students, but often have a particular focus such as science, arts or business, and students have to apply or enter a lottery to be able to attend.

However McCain has lumped charter schools and private school vouchers together as two good options, while Obama is opposed to vouchers and instead has proposed increasing funding for charter schools from \$200 million a year to \$400 million.

The money debate

Another difference between McCain's and Obama's platforms is that McCain has suggested keeping spending at current, while Obama proposes spending \$19 billion in new education spending.

Much of that money would go to early education – before kids are 5 years old. Obama says it is important to reach children before they fall behind in school.

McCain's campaign argues there is enough money to fund increased achievement.

"There is not an organization in the nation that will argue that more money is all we need," McCain spokesperson Lisa Graham Keegan told the NewsHour. "We have literally quadrupled our expenditures per pupil since 1958 in real dollars."

Obama has said new spending in education (funded in part by raising taxes on families earning more than \$250,000) is necessary to fulfill the under-funded goals of No Child Left Behind and to provide teachers and students with the resources they need all the way through their education process.

For more on the differences between the candidates, visit the [New York Times issue guide](#).

-- Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra

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