



# National Student/Parent Mock Election

## Teacher's Guide to 2008 Presidential Election Issues – Education Reform

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## 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>

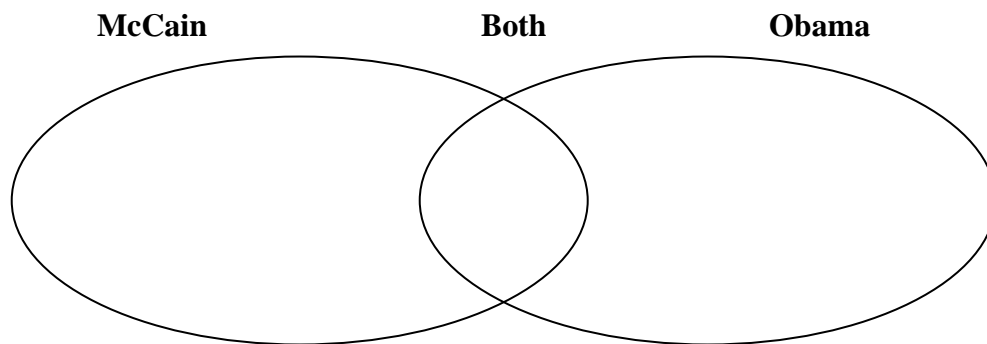
Obama campaign at: <http://www.barackobama.com/issues>

Google Election Tools for Teachers at:

[http://www.google.com/educators/elections\\_tools.html](http://www.google.com/educators/elections_tools.html)

## ACTIVITY: Compare and Contrast the Presidential Candidates' Positions on Improving American Education

1. Research the candidates' positions and proposals for improving our country's education. Use their campaign Web sites and other sources such as: [Google Election Tools for Teachers](#) and campaign literature. Search the news and speeches that deal with this issue.
2. Using key words or phrases, record the major economic proposals of McCain and Obama on this Venn diagram.



Questions based on your research and the graphic organizer above:

1. Do McCain and Obama have any similar views or solutions for our country's education issues or problems? If so, what are they and why did they agree on these specific issues?
2. On what education issues do McCain and Obama differ the most? Describe the differences.
3. What might this comparison tell us about the differences between the Republican and Democratic parties?
4. Which candidate(s) is more likely to believe in the following political ideas about American education? Write **M** for John McCain and **O** for Barack Obama.

\_\_\_ Federal government action can be a major force in improving American education.

\_\_\_ Emphasizes parent choice and limited government involvement as best for education.

\_\_\_ Federal funding for college grants and student loans to make college affordable for all.

\_\_\_ Supports school vouchers and virtual schools.

\_\_\_ No Child Left Behind law's goals are on-target, but they need revisions to be effective.

\_\_\_ Favors increased federal funding for many educational and early childhood programs.

# ACTIVITY: My Opinion – Do I Agree with the Candidates’ Positions on Improving Education?

**Directions:** Use your **Presidential candidates’ positions sheet** for determining which candidate you agree with most about improving education. Write the key words or phrases representing the candidate’s position for each of these education issues: the role of federal government, financial support, standards, and new programs.

## John McCain, Republican

Agree with his position on:

Disagree with his position on:

Uncertain or no opinion:

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## Barack Obama, Democratic

Agree with his position on:

Disagree with his position on:

Uncertain or no opinion:

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**Optional: Third party candidate:** \_\_\_\_\_

You will need to research the candidate's positions on the issue using the official web site links found at: <http://www.politics1.com/p2008.htm>

**Agree with his position on:**

**Disagree with his position on:**

**Uncertain or no opinion:**

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**Your decision:** Based on your research and the completed chart above, which presidential candidate do you agree with most on their positions? Explain why you support their plans for improving American education.

*For this issue, I believe that \_\_\_\_\_ has the best plans to deal with our country's education issues and problems because:*

## **ACTIVITY: Develop and Express a Viewpoint on Improving American Education**

Using what you have learned about this issue, **develop your own viewpoints on education and its specific issues: its goals, the role of federal government, standards and testing, funding, equal opportunity for all, child care and early childhood education, and college costs.** Some other questions to use to develop a viewpoint are:

\* **What should be the purpose and goals of American education?** Prepare workers for business? Develop students into active citizens for our representative democracy? Train supporters of national defense?

\* **Who should be the primary beneficiary of education -- students, society, businesses, or the nation?**

A. Sources to learn about education as an election issue:

**Thinking beyond the box – 2008 election issues on YouTube at:**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr6athHoxSM/>

**Education Week** (national education news) at:

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/news/national/index.html/>

The advocacy group **Strong American Schools** at: <http://www.edin08.com/>

B. Express your viewpoints on this issue by:

Class discussions or debate

Write a persuasive essay

Role-play as McCain or Obama giving a speech about improving American education

Think/Pair/Share discussion technique for each of the specific education issue

Write a letter to your elected officials about your viewpoints on educational reform via Strong American Schools at: <http://www.edin08.com/Participate.aspx/>

Another teacher's or student's creative idea

A blog; some good blogs for politics and education are:

Google Blog at: <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.debates.org/pages/dwoverview.html>

Roy Romer's education blog at: <http://roysblog.edin08.com/>

U.S. Politics chatroom on MySpace at:

<http://forums.myspace.com/73.aspx?fuseaction=forums.viewforum/>

## ACTIVITY: Research the Constitutional Requirements for Education

**Big question:** *"Does the U.S. Constitution guarantee U.S. citizens a free and equal education?"*

U.S. Constitution Online ( <http://www.usconstitution.net/> )had this question posed:

**"Is there anything in the U.S. Constitution that guarantees its citizens an education? My uncle is being forced to pay for summer school for his children by the New York City Board of Education. Unless he pays, my cousins are going to have to repeat the grade. I see this as an attack on the lower classes, who will obviously have a problem paying for their 'public school' education."**

The answer given was: "There is no enumerated constitutional right to an education. A state constitution may include such a right, but I doubt that being required to pay for education would be considered a violation of that right. The problem with something like your uncle's situation is that, to be blunt, if a child does not apply himself enough during the school year to pass from one grade to the next, is it the school's responsibility to pay for that child to have remedial classes to move along? I suspect not; after all, if your uncle does not wish to pay, the kids could just repeat the grade for free." Source: [http://www.usconstitution.net/constfaq\\_a4.html/](http://www.usconstitution.net/constfaq_a4.html/)

Since the Constitution does not mention education directly, what constitutes an educational right has to be determined by interpreting parts of the Constitution that deal with protection of individual rights, such as the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and associated U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

To study this topic, use the following internet sources:

U.S. Supreme Court education cases at:

[http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/cases/topics/tog\\_education.html/](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/cases/topics/tog_education.html/)

Landmark education cases at:

<http://www.landmarkcases.org/brown/home.html/>

Scenarios of landmark cases (excellent source of case studies or simulations) at:

<http://cte.jhu.edu/techacademy/fellows/Walston/supreme/supremecourt/supremecourt.html/>

Google Election Tools for Teachers at:

[http://www.google.com/educators/elections\\_tools.html/](http://www.google.com/educators/elections_tools.html/)

## **ACTIVITY: Evaluate the 2008 Presidential Campaign: *Is Education Getting the Attention it Deserves?***

Whether you are a student, parent or taxpayer, you are a stakeholder in what happens in this election and its effects on the quality of education in America. While McCain and Obama have education positions on their campaign web sites, it appears that education has not gotten much notice so far in candidates' speeches, news reports or op-ed articles.

Challenge activity -- *Determine whether education is getting enough attention by the candidates and the media to be considered a major issue of this presidential election campaign.*

1. First visit the web sites of the Obama and McCain campaigns and the comparison of the two candidates at: <http://www.obama-mccain.info/compare-obama-mccain-education-issue.php/> (The Obama-McCain comparison stated that “we found it difficult to pinpoint the position of John McCain on education from his campaign Web site....”)

2. To get an understanding of what is important to stakeholders, visit the web sites of advocacy groups such as:

Strong American Schools at: <http://www.edin08.com/>

Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) at: <http://www.pta.org/topics.asp/>

National Education Association at: <http://educationvotes.nea.org/>

3. Write brief summaries or lists of what the organizations above consider to be essential to improve American education.

4. For more information, skim through your local newspapers, scan the Internet, watch newscasts of campaign speeches, etc. Possible sources include:

[www.debates.org/pages/dwoverview.html](http://www.debates.org/pages/dwoverview.html)

Video clips on YouTube, Elections Video Search, Google Election News

Education as an election issue on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr6athHoxSM/>

Chatrooms such as: MySpace, U.S. Politics at:

<http://forums.myspace.com/73.aspx?fuseaction=forums.viewforum/>

## **ACTIVITY: Sponsor a Forum Where Local and State Officials Present Their Positions on Educational Reform**

The U.S. Constitution does not delegate power over education to the federal government, and education is not even mentioned in it. The 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment states, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” Therefore, education is primarily a state and local responsibility. It is state legislators and local school boards that make the vast majority of decisions that affect students’ education: funding, curriculum and standards, teacher certification and selection, school buildings and instructional materials.

**Sponsor an educational forum** for your community, sponsored by a parent-teacher association or your local League of Women Voters (or other non-partisan group). Invite your state legislators, school board members, school superintendent or other administrators to present their viewpoints about the key issues of educational reform:

- Standards and its testing programs;
- Priorities of programs and curriculum;
- Educating, recruiting and retaining quality teachers;
- Educational funding;
- Meeting the needs of all children: academic, social, and pre-school;
- Reducing dropout rates and the improving number of students attending college;
- Local issues of importance to improving the education of all students.

Format of the forum:

1. Be sure to invite officials and administrators of all viewpoints and political affiliation.
2. Establish the rules and procedures of the forum. Publish them with the forum’s public announcements.
3. Invite parent and interested students. Students should be prepared by their teacher on the specific educational issues and in developing questions for the speakers.

If a public forum is not possible, consider sponsoring a dialogue on educational reform on your local community Internet blog, or on a blog such as:

Strong American Schools at: <http://www.edin08.com/>

Roy Romer’s blog at: <http://roysblog.edin08.com/>

Or, have interested students, parents and community members send an e-mail letter to their local elected officials using the Strong American Schools Internet service at:

<http://www.edin08.com/Participate.aspx/>