

Good News for Presidential Candidates

The public supports a wide range of education reforms

Put foreign policy first, theorist Niccolò Machiavelli once advised his 16th-century Florentine prince. It's not bad advice for 21st-century presidential candidates, either. National security, not education, will be the overriding issue in the 2008 campaign, even if the Gates and Broad Foundations succeed with Strong American Schools, their \$60 million quest to place education front and center.

Still, schools will not be missing from the political agenda altogether. So long as the economy perks along and no one wants to cut Social Security or raise taxes on more than a few, then health care and education will be the top domestic issues. Clearly, no presidential issues kit can afford to be without an education page.

Too often candidates let vested interests and insistent advocates provide the content for that document. Many Democrats, for example, are currying favor with union interests by insisting on less student testing and more federal funding. "While the children are getting good at filling in all those little bubbles, what exactly are they really learning?" Senator Hillary Clinton asked delegates at a meeting of the New Hampshire chapter of the National Education Association late last May. "How much creativity are we losing? How much of our children's passion is being killed?" Meanwhile, one is hearing in Republican circles a great deal about getting Washington off the states' backs.

That may make political sense in the early days of a campaign when the opinions of the few count more than those of the many. Eventually, though, the next president must win support from a broad cross-section of voters across the country.

On education matters, a heap of valuable information can be found in the poll results presented in this issue. Shrewd candidates will scrutinize the hundreds of numbers set forth on pages 13 to 26 to extract the political truths buried within. To guide their search, I offer five basic themes that percolate through many of the answers potential voters have given:

More people support accountability than any other single education reform.

1. Although the public supports its public schools, it finds them mediocre at best, deserving no more than a grade of C.
2. People want to remedy that situation but are not nearly so doctrinaire as powerful interests and political elites. Ordinary voters are pragmatists, willing to try many different things, whether it be accountability, school choice, smaller classes, more spending, or rewarding good teachers.
3. More people support accountability than any other single education reform. If they do not trust all of the utopian promises offered by NCLB, neither do they want the federal government to abandon its efforts to hold state and local school officials to account. On the contrary, the public would expand accountability systems in several directions:
 - a. Create national standards to replace state-specific ones.
 - b. Demand that students pass high school exams before graduating.
 - c. Evaluate and reward teachers according to how much their students are learning.
4. The public wants schools, students, and teachers to be treated fairly. Money should be spent equally on different types of schools, different types of students, and across the board on all teachers, unless there are convincing reasons to do otherwise. Even extra rewards to effective teachers win only a moderately positive endorsement.
5. The public does not oppose school choice, but doesn't know much about charter schools. A charter platform will need a lot of explaining.

All this is good news for responsible aspiring leaders. From among the options available, the correct policies can be selected, and if persuasively described, perhaps even implemented post-election. May the best leader win.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
