

The Next President Had Many School Choices

Will he provide similar opportunities for others?

Not since Abraham Lincoln have we had a president with as unusual an early education as the one experienced by the man who will take office on January 20, 2009. John McCain and Barack Obama each had considerably more formal schooling than “Honest Abe,” who spent only a few months in a one-room schoolhouse in his childhood. But the oddities of their educational experiences exceed even those of Teddy Roosevelt, the only other contender for this honor. (Though home schoolers may claim TR as their own, he was actually tutored by paid professionals.)

McCain apparently attended some 20 schools, including military base schools, public schools, and the elite Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia. He was bounced among so many schools as a child that McCain claims to have been educated mainly in his “mother’s mobile classroom.” Obama attended Indonesian Catholic and public schools, took correspondence courses under his mother’s watch, and graduated from an elite Hawaiian independent school. His early schooling was so problematic that his mother enrolled Obama in the correspondence course so that he could learn English (see “The Early Education of Our Next President,” page 28).

Both candidates had mothers who taught their sons a great deal and made careful choices—when they could—in selecting their sons’ schools. In the end, both young men went to top-notch colleges and pursued advanced degrees; needless to say, both have accomplished much. One can hardly make a better case for school choice.

Obama and McCain have hinted at the possibility that they are willing to embrace school choice for the sons and daughters of other Americans. “A truly historic commitment to education,” Obama says, “will require a willingness to break free from the same debates that Washington has been engaged in for decades—Democrat versus Republican; vouchers versus the status quo; more money versus more accountability.” During the heat of the primary campaign, Obama proclaimed, “We need to support charter schools. I think it is important to experiment, by looking at how we can reward excellence in the classroom.” Although he voted against legislation that would permit a

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voucher experiment in Washington, D.C., he has since said, in perhaps an unguarded moment, “If there was any argument for vouchers, it was ‘Alright, let’s see if this experiment works,’ and if it does, then whatever my preconceptions, my attitude is you do what works for the kids.”

McCain goes much further, saying, “Choice and competition is the key to success in education in America. That means charter schools, that means home

schooling, it means vouchers.” On another occasion, he urged, “We should try charter schools all over America.”

If the next president decides to provide the range of choices for other Americans that he himself enjoyed many years ago, he would not have to win over a hostile public. According to the latest *Education Next*–PEPG poll, more Americans support than oppose charter schools, tax credits for education expenses, and Internet-delivered courses for advanced (and rural) students (see “The 2008 *Education Next*–PEPG Survey of Public Opinion,” page 12).

But the president would have some educating to do. Much of the public still knows little about charter schools, which today serve only 2 percent of the population. Online schooling is in its infancy, and Americans remain skeptical of its use for credit by either dropouts or home-schooled students.

Still, the public recognizes that the existing school system is mediocre or worse. Two-thirds give the nation’s schools a grade of no better than “C,” and more Americans think highly of their local police department than of their neighborhood school.

Nor are many people content with current federal efforts to fix the situation. Public support for No Child Left Behind eroded noticeably between 2007 and 2008.

Both Obama and McCain promise to reform that law. If they use the occasion to encourage creative new ways to give more Americans decent choices among schools—perhaps through charters, perhaps over the Internet, perhaps through vouchers or via the tax code—they could put their own heterodox education to good civic use.

— 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.
