

Presidential Politics and Education

by John F. Jennings

American political campaigns for the Presidency and for Congress are longer than the election periods in many other countries, but the issues separating the candidates for President and Congress do not necessarily become clearer due to the greater length of those campaigns. In other words, doing something longer does not necessarily mean doing it better.

What should be clear from this year's Presidential campaigning, but may not be, is that both Democrats and Republicans are committed to continuing with standards-based reform. George W. Bush and Al Gore have both proposed programs that are firmly in the standards camp. Both endorse the use by states and school districts of academic standards, aligned assessments, and accountability systems based on the results of those assessments, and both have proposed national financial assistance to help with this endeavor.

This is an important development. For Gore and the Democrats, arguments have been muted that inequalities in public education must be addressed first before standards, assessments, and accountability systems are put in place. For Bush and the Republicans, advocacy of vouchers for tuition at private schools is no longer the primary route to school reform.

Another important development is that both Republicans and Democrats now recognize that the national government will play a significant role in improving the public schools. Since the 1960s, Democrats in Congress and in the Presidency have avidly supported a federal role in education, and national Republican office-holders have usually agreed, but less uniformly and less enthusiastically. For most of the last ten years, though, the Republicans have dramatically pulled away from supporting federal aid to education. In 1995, when Republicans assumed control of the Congress, eliminations of federal programs and dismantling the U.S. Department of Education were proposed. During the Presidential campaigns of 1992 and 1996, the Republican candidates advocated vouchers for private school tuition as their main idea to improve education. This year, George W. Bush has changed that direction and is emphasizing the improvement of public schools. Consequently, the debate in the new Congress next year will revolve around refining a role played by the federal government for the last forty years. That shift could lead to more widely supported, bipartisan national efforts to assist the states and local school districts improve schools.

Those two major agreements, though, should not cloak significant differences between the candidate's approaches. Gore sees a comprehensive national role, including demanding accountability from teachers and students, but with substantial financial assistance to meet these demands. Bush's concept includes demanding accountability but offering a more limited range of programs as well as financial aid.

A few examples of the differences might help. Gore is proposing a \$50 billion ten-year program to provide access to pre-school education to all 4-year olds, while Bush is proposing that Head Start grantees emphasize quality in the services that they provide. Gore is proposing \$8 billion to assist school districts in issuing bonds to build schools and another \$12 billion in grants for school districts to build smaller high schools, while Bush wants to spend about a billion dollars only on Indian schools and in school districts with military dependent children. Gore is proposing \$8 billion over ten years in a multi-faced program to recruit new teachers, while Bush is proposing \$2 billion over five years in grants to the states to train and recruit teachers.

In total, Gore proposes spending over ten years about \$177 billion in direct grants and in tax expenditures, while Bush proposes spending over five years about \$25 billion. If we were to assume that Bush's spending would be extended for another five years to total about \$50 billion, then he is asking for education spending less than one-third of what Gore is proposing. Another significant difference is that Gore is proposing a trust fund for his increased spending, which means that this funding would be guaranteed and not subject to Congressional decision-making every year.

Other differences appear in the candidate's positions on accountability. Bush would require states to administer tests to students in grades 3-8, would require states to participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, would penalize states for lack of student achievement by withdrawing federal administrative funds, and would reward them for increases in test scores with grants from a pot of \$315 million. Gore adopts a similar but less specific approach regarding student achievement — encourage but not require states to test in grades 4, 8, and 12 using the National Assessment of Educational Progress,

penalize them for lack of achievement by withdrawing administrative funds, and somehow reward them for increases in student achievement.

While less prescriptive than Bush as regards student accountability, Gore is more demanding regarding teacher accountability. Gore requires each state to test those wishing to become teachers, requires peer review of current teachers, requires that all teachers within a state be certified by 2004, and requires a process to remove low performing teachers. Bush only requires states to maintain high professional standards for teachers.

With regard to failing schools, the two candidates take very different positions. Gore would require that such schools be given two years to improve, and if they do not, then the school would be dissolved. Principals and teachers would be given bonuses of up to \$20,000 and \$10,000 respectively to reconstitute the school, with authority vested in the school to choose its teachers. Gore has set aside \$2.5 billion to assist with that improvement. Bush, on the other hand, would give failing schools three years to improve (with no financial assistance), and if they do not, then parents would be granted vouchers of up to \$1,500 to send their children to private schools or to seek other services.

Al Gore and George Bush are in broad agreement that states and local school systems must raise their academic standards and institute accountability measures to ensure that students learn more. They are also in broad agreement that the federal government has a role to play in improving education. However, it makes a difference which one is elected. Bush and Gore have different views on how specifically to improve schools.

If Gore is elected, pre-school education will expand, failing schools will be assisted to improve, substantial aid will be directed to school construction, to recruiting new teachers and helping those who now teach to do better. If Bush is elected, states will be rewarded for increases in test scores, and vouchers for private school tuition will be given to students to leave persistently failing schools.

Whichever candidate is elected, the country will have a good debate next year on how to continue with our national efforts to improve the public schools. Having both Bush and Gore in favor of higher academic standards and of a significant role for the federal government in that endeavor is a good thing — both for the schools and for the country.