



# Education and presidential politics

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*The public may criticize presidential candidates for their views on education, but how much does the public really care about education when it comes time to vote?*

Education issues and U.S. presidential elections have always made uncomfortable bedfellows. Presidential candidates may articulate a promise-filled vision for education, but whether they can deliver on those promises is a different

story. The run-up to the 2020 election has so far followed a familiar script. Some candidates have offered plans to raise teacher pay and eliminate student debt. Others have promised to end standardized testing or make schools safer for students and teachers. But even for those with the best of intentions, making good on any large-scale education promise is not as simple as it sounds. Despite an annual education budget of just under \$73 billion, presidents and their administrations have limited power over hot-button issues like teacher compensation, testing, and school safety. These issues make for excellent campaign fodder, but, in reality, they are controlled by a large and often unwieldy cast of state and local leaders who may or may not care what the president thinks.

Since President Donald Trump has never demonstrated much interest in or a compelling vision for public education, this is likely not something that keeps him up at night. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, however, learned the limits of her power early on in the administration. Despite her zeal for deregulation and a choice-driven U.S. education system, DeVos has not transformed the operational landscape of public education in any significant way. All of her budget proposals and her efforts to garner support for privately funded “[Education Freedom Scholarships](#)” — which would allow students to attend private or religious schools by way of an annual tax credit — have found little support. And her efforts to paint U.S. public schools as flaming cauldrons of doom and despair have not really stoked a school choice revolution. Whatever impact DeVos has had comes in the form of damage, not progress. By rolling back several important Obama-era rules regarding student debt protections and civil rights enforcement, DeVos has eliminated some much-needed and hard-earned safeguards for students. This leaves the 2020 Democratic candidates with the challenging task of determining how to repair the damage.

## The perils of education politics

For several of the presidential candidates, the complex politics of public education have already caused some angst. Former Vice President Joe Biden had an embarrassing moment during one of the first debates when former candidate Sen. Kamala Harris called him out for working with

“segregationist lawmakers.” When Harris used Biden’s congressional record to question his commitment to civil rights, Biden was clearly taken by surprise and became more than a little flustered, especially when it came to the question of busing. Despite his strong civil rights record, his muddled response became the sound bite of the week and was a perfect example of how education can undermine even the most experienced politicians.

For both political and emotional reasons, the plight of teachers is always a constant theme in presidential elections. Teachers unions are a powerful force in politics, and their support can either buoy a candidate or drown them. At the same time, teachers represent a kind of hopeful selflessness that resonates with many Americans. Almost everyone has a favorite teacher who supported and believed in them, so when a candidate paints a picture of an increasingly beleaguered profession struggling to attract young talent, voters are eager to hear how they will change all that when they are president. Several candidates have laid out plans to increase teacher pay, especially for teachers in high-need, low-income schools; and some have talked about making more competitive teacher salaries a requirement for additional Title I funds.

But perhaps the best rule of thumb for any candidate seeking teacher support would be to first do no harm, something recent education secretaries should have also considered. Arne Duncan’s plan to evaluate teacher performance based solely on student test scores did little to improve teacher practice nationwide and made many teachers feel as if their careers were on borrowed time. And Secretary DeVos’ plan to eliminate the measly \$250 tax deduction for teachers who spend their own money on school supplies was ill-conceived, if not downright mean-spirited. When it comes to teachers, presidential candidates should embrace the power of the bully pulpit to remind Americans how challenging the profession can be. Then they should take the time to learn which policies truly promote and support excellent teaching.

### **Charter school debacles**

It is charter schools, however, that seem to be the political quicksand of this campaign season. Once the shiny bright object of education reform, charter schools are now being criticized and scrutinized by those who feel they represent an existential threat to traditional public schools. Part of the about-face came on the heels of Secretary DeVos, whose pro-school choice dogma seemed to pit charter and choice advocates against all those who hold public education dear. Also stoking the fire is the fact that in some states, charter schools are held to different (and often lesser) accountability standards than traditional public schools. This despite the fact they, too, are supported by public funds. New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker was caught in the muck early on when he waffled about his past support for charter schools and other choice options. He’s out of the race now, but if he’s selected to be the chosen candidate’s running mate, his pro-charter/choice past could come back to haunt him.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren has also tangled with charter school supporters. In her home state of Massachusetts, she voted to limit the expansion of charter schools, but in recent months candidate Warren has taken an even more aggressive stance against charters. Her education plan would eliminate federal funding for new charter schools and ban for-profit charter schools entirely. She also suggested a more stringent process for authorizing charters, a touchy issue for the charter community. The pushback against Warren’s plan came swiftly. Charter school

advocates accused her of pandering to the teachers unions (which are not enthusiastic supporters of charter schools), and parents in communities where charter schools are both prevalent and popular accused Warren of being tone-deaf to the concerns of urban parents struggling to find more equitable and often safer schools for their children. To her credit, Warren quickly met with activist groups and has promised to rethink her position. Her mea culpa has likely bought her some time to consider a more nuanced stance on this complicated issue.

Newbie candidate Michael Bloomberg, however, clearly has no fear of quicksand. Although he has not formally released an education plan at this time, his support for charter schools has been consistent and unequivocal. Under his leadership as mayor, the number of charter schools in New York City increased more than tenfold. He has promised that charter schools will be an important part of his education platform and has criticized other candidates for their anti-charter rhetoric.

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### **Education's place in the primary**

As the primaries continue, education issues, and whatever small controversies they may create, will fade into the background. This is the predictable arc of a presidential campaign. Education issues always surface in the early stages of the campaign as candidates scramble for support among key interest groups and state and local leaders. On occasion, a high-profile education issue will stir up some bickering among candidates, but as the field narrows and the competition gets tighter and meaner, education will once again become an issue best managed by state and local leaders.

Presidential candidates quickly learn that voters care about education only up to a point, and sometimes it is easier and safer for them to just avoid the issue and focus on something else. This is unfortunate because even if education is, for the most part, a local issue, its impact on our country is tremendous. In recent years, we have seen what happens when our electorate does not have a full and accurate understanding of their own democracy. If our country is to maintain the principles of a free and fair society, a high-quality education should and must matter to everyone, no matter how complicated the issues are. As Americans, we should expect no less from our candidates *and* ourselves.