

Will the light shine on education?

By **MARIA FERGUSON**

So far the presidential candidates have mostly avoided education as a political issue. Will that change after the parties settle on their candidates?

The presidential election year shines a light on the agony and the ecstasy of living in a democracy. On one hand, there is the hope and optimism of any new beginning. The promises and potential of a new, freely elected president are exhilarating and can make voters forget the more mundane challenges of running a democracy. Even an incumbent president can wax poetic about the next great chapter in his/her administration.

But then there is the other side of things: the shallow and reductive bickering, the farce-like quality of the primaries and caucuses, and the utter lack of depth, reason, and mutual respect. At times, the candidates seem to exist solely to provide fodder for late-night television. The entire process can be ridiculous and

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soul crushing all at once. As voters, we have no choice but to accept, if not embrace, both sides of the electoral process. Into the maelstrom each voter goes, looking for validation and reassurance about the things they care about.

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So what exactly do voters care about? A lot depends on which voters you ask. But if you care about public education, you are not in good company. According to Gallup, only 4% of Americans consider education the nation's most important problem. To start, education is not a big issue for aging baby boomers (and there are a lot of them). With their own children grown, their time and energy is now spent worrying about the economy, national security, immigration, and health care. Recent polling data show that millennial voters have a far greater interest in education, but their concerns are focused mostly on postsecondary education issues such as college affordability and managing student debt. The voting bloc focused on public education



— elementary through high school — is almost always a no show.

I am old enough now that I have experienced this lack of interest in education throughout many election cycles, and I can't help but fume over the irony. How many wise and accomplished people need to remind us that education is the cornerstone of a civil society? How many stories do we need to hear about the transformative power education has on the lives of individuals and nations? If education is so revered in America as the best and most reliable pathway to prosperity, then why do we allow the candidates and ourselves to punt on it so often?

To be fair, expecting presidential candidates to speak with substance and authority about public education issues puts them in a challenging position. Because public education is highly decentralized in this country, any candidate who articulates a national vision risks raising the hackles of diehard federalists who raise high the banner of local control over education. The recent authorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) only reinforced the idea that state and local leaders want autonomy over decision making, not heavy-handed federal policies. With the specter of accusations of federal overreach always lurking in the background, it is far safer for candidates to keep comments about education brief and aspirational.

Education issues also can be thorny and complicated. The Common Core backlash alone is enough to scare any candidate into silence. Poor Jeb Bush, once an ardent supporter of the Common Core standards and argu-

ably the most knowledgeable candidate when it comes to education, avoided the term entirely through the balance of his now suspended campaign. When asked about the Common Core, he emphasized higher standards and a less obtrusive federal role and quickly changed the subject. Other candidates have used far more colorful language when asked about the Common Core. The complex governance structure of public education systems and the confusion over terms like standards and curriculum unfortunately fed the cycle of misinformation that still surrounds the Common Core. A presidential campaign offers even more opportunities to stir up trouble over issues that few people fully understand.

Hillary Clinton found herself in the middle of a dustup late last year after saying that charter schools should not be a substitute for public schools. She added that most charter schools “don't take the hardest-to-teach kids, or, if they do, they don't keep them.” Many news outlets went to town on this, fully cognizant that the charter school debate has a strong class and equity component. Suffice to say, charter school advocates were not happy either. Since a great many people still don't understand that charter schools are actually public schools, the potential for voters to misconstrue a candidate's stance on a complex issue like this is high. I suspect Clinton will now focus on simpler issues like testing (bad), universal pre-K (good), and the rising costs of higher education (very bad). To her credit, she happens to know a lot about all three.

Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders pushed the outer

limits of aspiration when he announced a bold plan to provide free college tuition. Lamenting the high cost of college and the rising tide of student debt, last May, Sen. Sanders' introduced the College for All Act that calls for the federal government and states to share the burden. (The feds would pay \$2 in

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matching funds for every dollar spent by states on making tuition free at public colleges and universities.) Sanders also proposes cutting student loan interest rates to about 2% for undergraduates and allow those with student debt to refinance at lower rates. Sanders would impose fees on Wall Street to offset the costs of the plan, which are estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$70 billion to \$75 billion per year.

Sanders' proposal has been praised and condemned, but no matter what your opinion, candidate Sanders can't be accused on punting on education issues. His plan focuses squarely on an issue most voters can relate to, and he even makes Wall Street foot part of the bill. Sanders also reminds us that there is precedent in the U.S. for such a plan: After World War II, the G.I. Bill offered free education to more than 2 million veterans.

Despite the challenges associated with such a plan — most notably, the increased

financial burden on states — Sanders opened a reasonable debate about an important education topic. It was a refreshing change and spurred other candidates to respond accordingly. A few months after Sanders introduced his bill, Clinton announced a plan also aimed at reforming higher education. While her plan takes a different approach to controlling the cost of college, it is a substantive contribution to the debate. The Republican candidates have only halfheartedly addressed the topic, since most of their energy is focused on dismantling the Department of Education and eradicating the Common Core as if it were a childhood disease.

After the Republican and Democratic nominees are decided, it will be interesting to see just how much attention they pay to education during the final stages of the campaign. Aside from petty accusations about this and that and the usual litany of remarks about “the nation's failing schools,” I am predicting that the only issues that will see the partial light of day are controlling the cost of college, universal pre-kindergarten education, and school choice. Everything else is too messy, too complicated, or too boring. The quality of the debate on these issues will depend entirely on who the candidates are, but, in all likelihood, it will be fairly generic. With only 4% of voters focused on education, why bother making a fuss? Mark Twain must have been thinking about presidential elections when he defined education as “the path from cocky ignorance to miserable uncertainty.”