

# WHAT DEMOCRATS NEED TO SAY ABOUT EDUCATION

## Class Struggle

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<http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?pt=aQv7Q66Pcy65XAVIyW2UIX%3D%3D>

In the only exchange on education during the 2004 presidential debates, John Kerry made one argument: "The president who talks about No Child Left Behind refused to fully fund [it] by 28 billion dollars ... he didn't put in what he promised, and that makes a difference in the lives of our children." George W. Bush responded acidly: "Only a liberal senator from Massachusetts would say that a 49 percent increase in funding for education was not enough. We've increased funds. But, more importantly, we've reformed the system."

That sums up the education debate in last year's campaign. Bush championed reform and resources. Although Bob Dole had once wanted to shut down the Department of Education, in his first term, Bush supported standards-based accountability through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). And, though he fell short of his promises on money, Bush did approve more than \$30 billion in new K-12 education funding.

While Bush and the Republicans moved to the middle, Kerry and the Democrats retreated from it. When Bush signed the NCLB in 2002, liberal lions like Ted Kennedy stood by his side. But, in 2004, Democrats regularly attacked the law as "punitive." Howard Dean pilloried his opponents for supporting reform. John Edwards, though offering a detailed reform plan, said he regretted voting for NCLB because of how Bush administered it. Kerry, a longtime reformer, said the law "terrified" teachers. The party's top three education demands were money, money, and money. "You cannot promise to leave no child behind and then leave the money behind," Kerry often said.

While Democrats reinforced the old idea that they just want to spend, Bush appealed to a public that wants both accountability and funding. In 1996, two out of three registered voters thought Bill Clinton was the best candidate on education. By the end of the 2004 campaign, Bush enjoyed a small lead over Kerry on the issue.

These are vivid memories for me. I was one of Kerry's education advisers during the general election. I previously worked for--and have since advised--Edwards. The views expressed here are my own, but I bear plenty of responsibility for the developments described. Yet the attitudes of the candidates reflected the attitudes of the party. Top congressional Democrats today say nothing different.

It's stunning to see Democrats lose their edge on education. That's because, on education, Democrats don't need to explain why the United States needs vigorous government; Americans already want effective public schools. Through education, Democrats reach for their own deepest aspiration: a country where birth doesn't dictate destiny. Nothing offends Democratic ideals more than the fact that a typical poor or African American twelfth-grader reads at the same level as a typical middle-class or white eighth-grader. Nothing is a greater threat to middle-class prosperity than mediocre schools. If Democrats cannot speak powerfully to an issue that speaks so powerfully to them, they cannot expect to prevail on tougher ideological terrain.

To get the politics right, progressives need to act on a policy principle that Americans understand: Money ain't everything. The United States has tripled education funding per student since the 1960s, and we now outspend all but a few countries. But our students' reading and math scores have edged up only modestly, and our achievement remains in the middle of the developed world. Yes, money matters;

the shortfall in NCLB funding has hurt the law's own cause. Democrats deserve credit for supporting more spending on schools. But they squander that credit when they make money their only focus.

In emphasizing resources, Democrats evade questions of culture and institutions. Those matter, too. It matters whether we set high expectations for schools and teachers or accept mediocrity, and whether we impose consequences for failure or excuse it. That Republicans are fond of making these points--and unions and school officials are not fond of hearing them--does not make them less true.

Progressives are misled by the logic of their own Bush-hatred: Bush is for NCLB, so NCLB must be bad. Never mind that President Clinton embraced accountability before President Bush, Governor Ann Richards before Governor Bush. As the demands of NCLB mount, and as resistance to those demands spreads into conservative strongholds like Texas and Utah, many progressives are joining the fun. But opportunistic attacks are not an affirmative agenda.

At a time when Americans seek strength in their leaders, Democrats should find the strength to speak hard truths about our schools and support essential changes. At a time when Americans are unsure what Democrats stand for, Democrats should give some resounding answers: The achievement gap is a national disgrace, and equal opportunity is a national command. Democrats will require greater support for schools, and greater demands on them, than ever before. They will use federal power to pursue equal justice--even at the expense of states' rights, even in the face of their own constituencies. Democrats will put children first.

The first task is to stop the unprincipled attacks on NCLB. At its heart, this is the sort of law liberals once dreamed about. In the 1970s, liberal litigators fell one vote short of a Supreme Court decision requiring evenhanded education funding. NCLB doesn't guarantee funding, but it goes one step further by demanding educational *results*. It says that, when states accept federal funding, they must ensure that all children (except the most disabled) meet "challenging academic standards." This has made achievement a legal command, not just a gauzy aspiration. The law requires a form of affirmative action: States must show that minority and poor students are achieving proficiency like everyone else, or else provide remedies targeted to the schools those students attend. The law's unyielding demands have created a powerful tool to raise both expectations and money.

Tough accountability serves kids, particularly the poorest. Studies of high-poverty, high-achieving schools (by Kentucky's Prichard Committee, the University of Texas, Ohio's Board of Education, and others) consistently show that high expectations are critical to good results. The Hoover Institution's Eric Hanushek has shown that states that had adopted accountability laws with consequences for failure before NCLB existed have seen greater increases in achievement than states that didn't. NCLB's requirement to disaggregate data based on race and income has cast a harsh but necessary light on the achievement gap. It is too early to judge the law's impact, but recent surveys by two respected think tanks, the Center on Education Policy and the Education Trust, suggest scores are rising and gaps are slowly narrowing.

In President Bush's first term, Education Department officials fueled anger at NCLB through indifference and incompetence. They found the money to pay off Armstrong Williams, but not to pay for high-quality tests that accurately measure achievement. They drew a rebuke from the Government Accountability Office for failing to give states key guidance. They conflated reasonable concerns about inflexible regulations with unreasonable efforts to evade the law's core demands. The new education secretary, Margaret Spellings, has struck a better balance, but she is digging out of a hole. Bush continues to prioritize plutocratic tax cuts over an education bill that costs a fraction as much.

The law itself is too stringent in some ways and too lax in others. Schools may be labeled as "needing improvement" because of statistical anomalies. So many schools are subject to mandated remedies that state bureaucracies are being overwhelmed. Because NCLB requires 100 percent of students to demonstrate "proficiency" by 2014, but allows states to define proficiency as they please, states can create the illusion of progress by lowering their standards. Some states, like Texas, have done just that.

Instead of working to address these failures, too many progressives have focused on pleasing angry activists. The Democratic primaries brought tremendous pressure on candidates--partly because of unions' influence and partly because of a primary schedule frontloaded with states lacking any appetite for reform. When *Education Week* ranked all state accountability systems, New Hampshire and Iowa took the last two spots. Appealing to rural and suburban audiences contented with their schools, Howard Dean won cheers as he derided the "No School Board Left Standing" Act.

Resistance to federal power is now a progressive rallying cry in education. Democrats at the National Conference of State Legislatures recently helped draft a bipartisan report charging that NCLB infringes upon states' Tenth Amendment rights. Most Utah Democrats supported a new state law jeopardizing \$76 million in aid to poor students on the grounds that the state's own assessment system should have priority over NCLB. But that state system does not even exist today; the real question, as the law's lead sponsor asked, was, "At what price is our sovereignty for sale?" The National Education Association (NEA) is now suing Washington for forcing states to spend more money on education. Connecticut's Democratic attorney general, Richard Blumenthal, has praised the suit and threatened to bring one of his own.

When Democrats become champions of states' rights in schools, it is no wonder voters think the party has no principles. The federal government has served progressive educational ends for decades: demanding desegregation for African American children, offering Head Start for poor preschoolers, providing Title I funding to disadvantaged school-aged students, and requiring individualized treatment for children with disabilities. Only the federal government can ensure a fair chance for all American children. Before NCLB, most states didn't even track the performance of poor students. Thanks to NCLB, many schools are now offering those students help they desperately need. If the NEA's suit prevails in court, it won't even yield more money; it will just yield precedents limiting federal power and enable states to ignore the law's demands. That would be sad: One of the NEA's plaintiffs told *The New York Times* that NCLB had forced her district to offer longer school days and Saturday classes for low-achieving students. Progressives should celebrate that fact, not complain about it.

Democrats labeling NCLB as "punitive" see the law through the wrong end of the telescope. Schools that fall short under NCLB may indeed be required to offer tutoring after school, or to help students transfer to other public schools, or to reopen as charter schools. These steps may look punitive to many adults inside the schools. For children who aren't learning, however, these measures offer hope for a better education.

Other proposals from the left would dash inner-city hopes to placate suburban anxieties. Many parents at better schools now worry that rote "teaching to the test" has crowded out better teaching. Much of that problem could be addressed by spending more on complex assessments worth teaching to. That would preserve the accountability so critical in the worst schools, which, at least now, are teaching to something. Yet many progressives, including state legislators and Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd, would allow student performance to be counterbalanced by academic indicators of states' choosing. In some iterations, these measures could include parental satisfaction or student attendance. This regime

would replace the clear demand for student achievement with a malleable nonstandard. It would be fine for most students in Greenwich, but a step backward for Bridgeport and New Haven.

Progressives seeking to gut NCLB should explain when, if their effort succeeds, the federal government will again commit to ensuring that every poor African American child can read. Progressives should be working to fix NCLB in a way that honors their values. It is right to seek the \$12 billion needed for full funding of NCLB but wrong to disable the law until that staggering sum arrives. It is right to distinguish truly lousy schools from those on the margin but wrong to leave the distinction to state bureaucracies.

Rather than siding with foot-dragging states, progressives should support more vigorous use of federal power in the service of equal citizenship for all. National standards and national tests in reading and math would advance that ideal. There is no reason that 50 states should have 50 different definitions of proficiency; the reading and math skills required to flourish economically and participate politically across the United States are increasingly the same. In states across the South and West that now spend little on schools and mask weak results by applying low standards, national norms would become a lever to increase both achievement and funding. Generous funding could ensure a high-quality test that adequately measures complex knowledge and skills. (An existing test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, does a good job but is not widely used.) With a huge data set, educators could better measure achievement. Parents would get a better picture of their children's progress compared with others.

National standards and a national test aren't radical ideas. Clinton proposed them on a voluntary basis; a few conservatives like the Fordham Foundation's Chester Finn have supported them. The right has kept standards entirely at the state level with talk of a "national school board," but Americans are loyal to their children's schools, not state bureaucracies. Polls have shown that two-thirds of Americans would support a national test. Progressives should welcome a debate over whether American citizenship should mean the same thing everywhere or if states should protect their prerogatives. Let Bush defend states' rights for a change.

The tougher challenge for progressives is not to fix NCLB, but to stop talking about it all the time--and instead offer an educational vision of their own. Bush isn't vulnerable for supporting standards; he is vulnerable for believing standards are enough. Tests measure progress but don't teach children.

Progressives should tackle a challenge all but ignored by Bush: strengthening the quality of teachers. As the Education Trust notes, good teachers are the single most important factor in good schools--affecting student achievement more than race, poverty, or parental education. Three years of good teachers can lift students' scores by 50 percentile points compared with three years of lousy teachers, according to researcher William Sanders. But, as talented women have moved on to other professions, teacher quality has declined. Education majors score below national averages on standardized tests. Most schools do little to draw or keep more talented teachers: Onerous hiring procedures discourage able candidates, while the lockstep pay scale rewards seniority and accumulated degrees, not success. Schools offer \$80,000 salaries to middle-aged and mediocre gym teachers while losing bright young chemistry teachers who make only \$40,000. Today, a middling performer can get a routine grant of tenure after three years, then become virtually impossible to remove for three decades. One North Carolina study showed that school superintendents would have liked to remove about one in 25 tenured teachers per year, but actually removed fewer than one in 600. Teacher quality is lowest in the poorest schools, where good teachers are needed most. Students at high-poverty schools are nearly twice as likely to be taught by teachers who lack even a minor in the relevant subject.

Strengthening teaching requires changes to the pay system and school culture that abet mediocrity. Standing alone, the usual liberal solution--across-the-board pay hikes--perpetuates the maldistribution of good teachers and reinforces the irrelevance of achievement. High-poverty schools need to attract more teachers with bonuses, and all schools need to attract better teachers with the promise of higher earnings for better results. Teachers reasonably worry about arbitrary merit bonuses, but performance pay need not be arbitrary. Sanders and others are developing methods to measure each teacher's contribution, accounting for students' starting points and their expected progress. Together with peer and principal reviews, these methods promise at least as rich a basis for evaluation as those available in other professions where performance pay is the norm.

While schools need better pay to attract good teachers, they also need better systems to remove bad ones. Today dismissal can take years, cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and require proof of outrageous conduct. That is unfair to students and good teachers who want peers who work as hard as they do. Faculty deserve protection against dismissals based on politics or personal animus, but schools should extend the periods needed to get tenure and streamline procedures so dismissals are fair but fast. Finally, talented young people seeking to enter teaching should not be required to get education degrees with no proven link to classroom performance.

Although still in their infancy, reforms along these lines have shown promise. When Chattanooga's lowest-performing schools offered teachers \$5,000 bonuses, free graduate-school tuition, and mortgage assistance, vacancies dropped by 90 percent. The Milken Family Foundation's Teacher Advancement Program offers bonuses up to \$5,000 based on a combination of evaluations and test scores. Most schools in the program are outperforming similar schools outside it. According to a recent evaluation, Teach for America's talented novices, lacking traditional training, outperform typical teachers in math instruction and equal them in reading.

A sound national plan would put big money on the table for school districts that adopt real reforms in pay, tenure, and licensing for teachers. To see what works best, schools should be encouraged to try different--and ambitious-- approaches. With federal help, a city might offer a promising new math teacher in a poor school district \$60,000 instead of \$40,000; after excelling in the classroom for two years, that teacher might earn \$80,000. Raises averaging \$20,000 for one-third of the teachers at 10 percent of schools would cost \$2 billion annually in a system spending over \$400 billion, but could show the way to transform teaching.

Progressive leaders should couple these reforms with a sustained call for Americans to teach in troubled schools. Twelve percent of Yale seniors applied to Teach for America this year. How many more talented Americans, young and old, would teach if their country called?

Most of these ideas have long been championed by the Progressive Policy Institute and, more recently, by the bipartisan Teaching Commission. But, while such proposals thrive in think-tank hothouses, they wither in the heat of Democratic politics. Al Gore and John Kerry both offered agendas along these lines for teacher quality. But, after giving speeches and garnering media accolades, both candidates barely mentioned their ideas again. Nor have congressional Democrats stepped up to promote them.

One reason is ideology. Progressives remain uncomfortable with market pressures in education. They prefer to talk about teachers as saints who never worry about money. Most teachers *are* great people, and many perform heroically in impossible circumstances. But it is no insult to say that teachers are also human beings who vary in talent, who respond to incentives, and who need to be accountable like other professionals. At a time when capitalism has enhanced productivity around the world, there is

something sad about liberals stopping performance pressure from improving the public institutions they hold dear.

Political opposition from teachers' unions is a different problem. Although the American Federation of Teachers has historically been open to performance pay, the much larger NEA (with the exception of one affiliate in Denver) opposes it. Both unions oppose serious tenure reform.

But the unions do not control the agenda. After four years of inaction on teacher quality, Bush has a performance-pay pilot--though one funded far less generously than Kerry had proposed. Republican governors like Tim Pawlenty and Arnold Schwarzenegger are pushing performance pay, and Schwarzenegger is putting tenure reform on California's ballot. Polls show broad public support for teaching reforms; performance pay, for example, is favored even by a majority of Democrats. A smart Republican presidential candidate will probably press teacher reform in 2008, as John McCain considered doing in 2000.

Progressives can let conservatives use teacher quality as a political bludgeon, or they can make the teacher agenda their own and attack the Bush administration's timidity. There is no question that the bolder course will cause some immediate political pain, but progressives must return to their roots as reformers if they are to recapture their leadership on an issue at the heart of their identity.

Many progressives are viscerally uncomfortable disagreeing with unions while the president is assailing already decimated rights to organize and bargain. But there has to be a distinction between supporting the rights of unions and supporting their every demand. And labor has a stake here, too. Support for reform feeds support for resources. The number of Americans who identify lack of funding as the biggest problem facing schools has risen since 2001, before NCLB passed. As Center for American Progress Fellow Ruy Teixeira puts it, "Democrats will never build big majorities for more spending on education, or any other social program, unless they convince more voters they'll spend the money well."

Advancing national accountability and improving teacher quality should be only parts of a progressive education agenda. The achievement gap opens before children even reach elementary school, yet U.S. support for preschool lags well behind other nations. So progressives should press for big expansions in high-quality early education. Parents want some choice and diversity among schools. So progressives should renew their support for public school choice and charter schools. There is probably much else besides.

But there should be a common thread to the progressive agenda. It's about thinking big again. It's about offering resources and reform. And it's about believing in public schools enough to challenge them. If being a progressive means anything, it should mean believing that public institutions like schools can take the hard steps necessary to improve themselves and improve our society. It is honorable to defend a Social Security status quo that works, but it is something else to defend an education status quo that does not. When progressives get their policies back in line with their commitments, they will serve American children, and themselves.