
Presidential Hopefuls Differ on K-12 Spending

By [Alyson Klein](#)

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Educators are still waiting for the presumptive Democratic and Republican presidential nominees to put forth detailed plans on education that would allow a comparison of how the two would shape federal K-12 policy over the next four years.

But in at least one area, the differences between Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., are clear: education spending.

Sen. McCain pledged in a speech last month “to make government in Washington more efficient” and to “freeze discretionary spending until we have completed top-to-bottom reviews of all federal programs to weed out failing ones.”

Sen. Obama, meanwhile, has proposed about \$18 billion annually in new federal education spending, including programs aimed at expanding early-childhood education and bolstering teacher training.

While it’s unclear how he would reshape the No Child Left Behind Act, Sen. Obama has also advocated additional funding for the law’s programs.

“We can’t afford to leave the money behind for No Child Left Behind,” he said in a June 3 speech in St. Paul, Minn., in which he unofficially claimed the Democratic nomination. “We owe it to our children to invest in early-childhood education [and] recruit an army of new teachers and give them better pay and more support.”



Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain, left, listens to a question from Spencer Macke, 7, during an interview in Cincinnati, Ohio, on June 26. The 1st grader and his younger sister were rewarded for raising money for troops abroad by getting to ask a series of five questions, including "Were you ever in a tank?" and "Did you ever use a M-16?"

—LM Otero/AP

By contrast, Sen. McCain thinks the NCLB law has been adequately funded, Lisa Graham Keegan, a top education adviser to the candidate, said at a forum June 12 at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington think tank.

It isn't clear whether Sen. McCain's plan to freeze domestic spending for a year would include all federal education programs.

Some analysts say level funding or cuts appear likely, given Sen. McCain's plan to keep most of President Bush's tax cuts in place and to balance the federal budget.

"It's impossible that he could make investments in education," said Robert Gordon, who was Sen. John Kerry's domestic-policy adviser during the Massachusetts Democrat's 2004 presidential campaign. "It's impossible to imagine he could do anything but cut spending on education, just because it's the only way to begin to make the numbers add up."

Sen. Obama's plan to repeal President Bush's tax cuts for some high-income taxpayers "makes it possible to talk about investments in education," said Mr. Gordon, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress Action Fund, the advocacy arm of the Washington-based CAP.

Federal Funding Debate

Edward Kealy, the executive director for the Committee for Education Funding, a Washington-based lobbying group, said that if Sen. McCain, as president, decided to level-fund education programs, that would amount to a cut, because increasing student enrollments and inflation would mean the same amount of funding wouldn't go as far.

Dan Lips, a senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, based in Washington, said that federal education spending has risen by more than 40 percent since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind law more than six years ago, and that the boost hasn't led to a significant increase in student achievement.

He noted that federal appropriations account for just 9 percent of all K-12 education spending nationally, and he suggested that states and local governments would be better positioned to finance and implement many education programs.

"Federal funding comes with strings," Mr. Lips said. "I think people should recognize that there isn't simply a pot of additional funding buried under Capitol Hill that could be used to improve schools."

Sen. McCain's campaign did not respond to calls seeking more detail on his education spending proposals by press time. But, during the Fordham Foundation event, Ms. Keegan said the senator would release an education plan around "back to school" time.

Sen. McCain has put forth some [interesting statements](#) embracing performance-based pay for teachers, Mr. Gordon said. But, to carry out those plans, he will have to deliver the resources, Mr. Gordon said.

"The political reality is that if you're going to drive reform, ... you need to put money behind that," he said.

It's unclear whether Sen. McCain's plan to freeze most domestic programs would continue the stalemate over reauthorization of the NCLB law.

Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, cited President Bush's unwillingness to raise education funding as one

major reason that the law's renewal, which had been scheduled for 2007, has stalled.

Obama's Boost



Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama poses with a group of children in a youth program while touring the East Community Ministry in Zanesville, Ohio, on July 1.

—Jae C. Hong/AP

Sen. Obama's \$18 billion **education plan** includes significant funding for prekindergarten programs, including proposals to quadruple enrollment in Early Head Start, expand the child-care-development tax credit so that it better targets low-income families, and increase aid for programs that provide home-visiting services to disadvantaged first-time mothers.

The Democrat's pre-K-12 plan includes new money to offer "teacher residencies," which would permit students interested in serving in high-need schools to work alongside master teachers while earning a degree in education.

And Sen. Obama has suggested \$1 billion to help create "career ladders" for teachers, which would allow some educators to get extra pay for serving as mentors to new teachers. He's also proposed a \$200 million program to help school districts extend instructional time.

In addition, Sen. Obama would like to put more federal money into education research, although his plan isn't specific about how much.

The prekindergarten portion of the plan would be paid for by delaying a project at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration for five years, auctioning off surplus federal property, closing a tax loophole for corporate executives, among other measures, according to the proposal.

The rest of the programs would be paid for "using a small portion of the savings associated with fighting the war in Iraq," according to the education plan outlined on Sen. Obama's campaign Web site, although that plan gives no details about how much funding might become available through such savings or when.

But the \$18 billion figure sounds "like an overreach," said Mr. Lips of the Heritage Foundation. If Sen. Obama is elected, education will have to compete with other priorities, including health care and energy, he said.

Mr. Kealy of the Committee for Education Funding said, though, that Sen. Obama's proposal could represent a "turning point for education funding, which has seen only modest increases in recent years."

"That's something to hold a new administration accountable to," Mr. Kealy said. "We know there will be all sorts of statements during election season. But you've got to be there for the long haul.

"A new administration will come in, and they'll say, 'There's so many things we didn't expect. We'll just have to put this stuff on hold for a while.'"