

The Education Campaign: Addressing Inequality through Teaching and Learning?

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Other than Hillary Clinton's adoption of Bernie Sanders's proposal to make college tuition free for most Americans, we haven't heard much about education in this year's election. The focus has been on economic inequality, immigration, trade, and national security – all important issues, of course. But the candidates' silence on primary and secondary education is striking, especially given how much attention education was receiving just a few years ago.

Before the election, before Black Lives Matter, and before the refugee crisis and the rise in terrorist attacks around the world, education was getting plenty of public attention. A national campaign attacked teachers and their unions for protecting ineffective educators and disregarding the needs of students. President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan rolled out a program that promised to strengthen public schools, largely by increasing evaluation of teachers and expanding charter schools. Newark gained national attention for a plan to reform its schools, led by Mayor Cory Booker, Governor Chris Christie, and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg –

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a plan that ultimately failed but that reflected a growing neoliberal tendency, embraced by Republicans and Democrats alike, to turn to private companies for solutions to public education.

At the same time, we began to hear more criticism of standardized testing as a means of either improving education or evaluating teachers. A grassroots movement, led by parents and teachers, mobilized against standardized testing, the privatization of public education, and in support of better school funding. And public debate erupted over the latest effort to standardize education, the Common Core.

I couldn't believe that the presidential candidates had nothing to say about education, so I visited their websites to find out what they had to say. Given everything I'd heard about Trump offering only minimal policy statements, I wasn't surprised to find nothing more than a short video lambasting the Common Core and bemoaning the U.S.'s poor standing in global test scores. Nor was I surprised to find that Clinton had much more to say about education on her website than she had in any of the speeches I've heard. She lists a dozen idealistic but clearly-stated claims about education, focused on addressing specific problems, including one I've raised here several times — the need for more alternatives to college.

What really got my attention, though, is that Clinton's site presents education as both reflecting economic and racial inequality and having the potential to reduce it. Of course, neither attention to the achievement gap nor the idea that better education gives people more economic opportunity is new. But the site makes an especially strong case for the importance of inequalities in education. It includes a section with nine charts detailing, in very simple and powerful images, the multiple ways that education mirrors economic and racial inequality in the U.S. The charts document increasing segregation, higher drop out rates and lower test scores among black and Latino students than among whites, the low incomes of kindergarten teachers, and the country's relatively low rate of college completion, among other things. The page ends with the claim, drawn from the Center for American Progress, that closing the education gap would strengthen the economy.

The campaign also links inequality with teaching, noting the challenges teachers face to "fill gaps that we as a country have neglected—like giving low-income kids, English-language learners, and kids with disabilities the support they need to thrive." The site also addresses the needs of teachers as workers, promising to prepare and support teachers in this important work and arguing for raising teachers' salaries — a statement that is especially significant in an era when state

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cuts to education funding have left so many schools in poorer districts struggling and when public discourse has villainized teachers and their unions.

The campaign doesn't actually mention teachers' unions, either as allies or, happily, as scapegoats, though elsewhere Clinton does promise to restore bargaining rights and defend workers from "partisan attacks." Also, while I'm pleased to see Clinton suggest that we should treat teachers as valuable professionals, I'm wary of promises to "modernize" the profession, in part because the site doesn't explain what that means. The site makes some reference to updating schools in order to ensure that every child learns about computers, but it also calls for applying "best practices from community and charter schools." While I'm glad that Clinton isn't pushing the idea of creating more charter schools, she needs to look more carefully – and much more critically — at the very mixed track record of charter schools.

Charter schools are just one part of a general push, by Democrats and Republicans alike, to privatize public education. As John Russo and I suggested when Clinton and Kaine visited Youngstown's East High School recently, I'd like to see Clinton challenge the push to hand control of public schools over to private for-profit companies. As Molly Knefel pointed out recently in *In These Times*, the Democrats have a problematic record of supporting privatization and business-centric approaches to education reform – policies that have not worked.

Standardized testing generally benefits test-making companies more than anyone else. Unfortunately, Clinton's site says nothing about the debate over testing. While the charts highlight the well-established fact that poorer students and students of color generally lag behind on test scores, Clinton apparently does not question either the validity or the centrality of standardized testing. Instead, the site treats the testing data as a reliable measure of educational inequity. To be clear, the inequity of public education is real, but I'd like to see policy makers – including the presidential candidates — acknowledge the role that testing plays in *reinforcing* inequity, as Diane Ravitch – once a proponent of testing and now one of its strongest critics — has shown.

Given the importance of education in civic life generally and in providing opportunities for poor and working-class children, especially, the candidates' silence on K-12 education in their speeches has been disappointing. After all, free college tuition won't do much good if students don't receive a decent education in elementary, middle, and high school. Trump's all-too brief comments – 40 seconds equals less than 100 words! – suggest that he simply doesn't care much about

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education at all. I don’t care how good Trump’s words are, that’s just not enough.

Clinton’s website offers some modest signs of hope. Although she does not take on privatization, especially the turn to charter schools and the continued emphasis on testing, she emphasizes the relationship between education and inequality and acknowledges the need to treat and pay teachers as professionals. It’s not the education policy of my dreams, but it’s a gesture in the right direction.

Still, platforms and promises don’t necessarily translate into real policy change. It’s easy to praise teachers and promise improvements, but it is much, much harder to secure the funds and implement change. Poor and working-class students need a variety of changes in public education, and they need leaders and policy makers who can turn good intentions and incisive analysis into real opportunities.

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