



## Insight

# Two Different Approaches to Education Reform

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### A Comparison of the Republican and Democrat 2012 Education Platforms

Just as in economic and budgetary policy, our two political parties have very different approaches to reforming education for the next generation of American students. For education policy the primary difference is the role the federal government plays in educating our children. While some will argue that the political party platforms are fleeting documents that few will read, they do outline the policy stances of each party and paint very different visions of the direction each party will take our country. Below is a short primer on how each party proposes to reform our educational system.

**Academic Standards:** While both parties support high academic standards for our children, they advocate very different philosophies on how that should be achieved. The Republican platform supports *“a world-class system of education, with high standards, in which all students can reach their potential,”* trusting in state and local control over our schools to develop those standards. The Democrat platform states: *“the President challenged and encouraged states to raise their standards so students can graduate for college or career and can succeed in a dynamic global economy. Forty-six states responded, leading groundbreaking reforms that will deliver better education to millions of American students.”* This is a subtle reference to the Common Core Standards in math and reading that were created by the National Governors Association and the Chief State School Officers which the Administration strongly supports. Many believe that these Common Core Standards will lead to national education standards increasing the federal government’s role in our public schools.

**School Choice:** One of the major differences between the two parties is in the area of school choice and the opportunity for disadvantaged parents to have the same educational opportunities for their children as parents with the economic means to send their children

to better schools. While both political parties support public school choice, this is where the similarities end. The Republican Party devotes a majority of its education platform to consumer choice, outlining new ideas ranging from home-schooling and year-round schools to numerous options for school choice including public school choices such as charter schools and virtual schools to private options such as vouchers and tax credits. The Republican platform praises the success of the only federal private school choice program, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, and strongly criticizes the President, Congressional Democrats and teacher unions for their attempts to terminate the program. Finally, the Republican platform advocates that *“federal money through Title 1 for low-income children and through IDEA for disabled youngsters should follow the students to whatever school they choose.”*

In sharp contrast, the Democrat education platform only devotes one sentence to school choice clearly limiting such choices to the public sector. The Democrat Platform states, *“We will continue to strengthen all our schools and work to expand public school options for low-income youth, including magnet schools, charter schools, teacher-led schools and career academies.”*

**Teachers:** While both party platforms commend teachers for the job they do to educate our children, the differences lie in policies that take on the *status quo* and teacher unions. The Republican education platform supports merit pay, teacher liability, background checks and alternative certification to find good teachers in other fields such as business, math and science and the military. These policies are uniformly opposed by the politically powerful teacher unions. The Democrat education platform is more consistent with the positions of teacher unions; referencing how the President *“helped save more than 400,000 educator jobs”* and how he has a *“plan to prevent more teacher layoffs”*. There is no mention of paying teachers based on performance, rather the Democrat platform states that they *“believe in carefully crafted evaluation systems that give struggling teachers a chance to succeed and protect due process if another teacher has to be put in the classroom.”*

**Higher Education:** Both documents recognize that college costs are rising dramatically and without policies to address this trend a college education will soon be unaffordable for the average American family while others will be left with a legacy of debt. However, the policies to address college costs by the two parties could not be further apart. The Republican platform states that *“student loan debt now exceeds credit card debt, roughly \$23,000 for each of the 35,000 debtors and over 50 percent of recent college graduates are unemployed or underemployed”* making it difficult to pay off student debt for years. Their solution is to change the status-quo and establish *“new systems of learning to compete with traditional four-year colleges.”* The platform also recommends changes in federal student

aid to provide more information to families and students about college completion rates, repayment rates and future earnings so they can make informed decisions on what college will meet their individual needs. Finally, the Republican platform strongly supports returning the private sector to the student aid business and opposes the federal takeover of originating student loans.

In contrast, the Democrat education platform applauds its efforts to increase funds for federal student aid programs and eliminate the private sector from the federal student loan program. They commend their efforts to *“take on the banks to reform our student loan program”* claiming the success of the Federal Direct Loan Program to make college more affordable. There is no mention in their platform of the enormous debt facing college graduates with few job opportunities to pay it back. Their platform, does, however, *“pledge to encourage colleges to keep their costs down by reducing federal aid to those who do not.”*

Historically, education policy has been bipartisan, with both parties recognizing the need for all American students to have access to a quality education. However, both political parties have advocated very different approaches in how to reform our educational system to achieve that goal. Republicans believe in local control over our schools with parents having as many options as possible to ensure their children receive a good education. Democrats support the public education system as an institution and believe there is a strong role for the federal government in efforts to reform it. As in other policy areas, there are very clear differences between the two political parties on how to reform American schools.