



## Insight

# A Review of Presidential Candidates' Proposals on Education Policy

ISABEL SOTO, TOM LEE | DECEMBER 6, 2019

## Executive Summary

- The need for robust education reform has become more urgent as the labor market changes and tightens, and yet the presidential candidates on the whole are not focused on education policy.
- The main policy proposals offered by Democratic presidential candidates so far—forgiving student debt and making college tuition free—are palliative solutions that do not address the fundamental causes of an underperforming education system.
- Candidates have offered some proposals for reforming K-12 education and encouraging apprenticeships, but more proposals are needed for aligning the needs of the workforce with the goals and structure of the education system.

## How Education Has Taken a Back Seat

A well-educated labor force is essential for [maximizing](#) sustainable long-term economic growth and productivity. Unfortunately, [poor](#) proficiency measures in K-12 reading and math scores and the projected [skills shortage](#) in the labor market indicate that the current education system is not performing adequately. Despite the obvious need for education reform, the issue has received little attention: Over the 659 minutes that made up the first five Democratic presidential debates, only 18.5 of those minutes have been about education.<sup>[1]</sup> What little has been said has focused on the most visible issues in education—student debt and college tuition inflation.

This analysis examines the various proposals from the Democratic presidential candidates. As the debates indicate, candidates are focused on questions of education financing. While important, addressing debt and tuition do not address the most pressing needs in education reform.

## Proposals on Higher Education

The proposals offered by Democratic presidential candidates on student debt and tuition are the main and, in some cases, the only policy solutions offered on education.

### *Student Debt and Free Tuition*

- Former Vice President Joe Biden, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julian Castro, and Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-WI), Cory Booker (D-NJ), and Michael Bennet (D-CO) have proposed making two-year community colleges tuition-free through federal and state partnerships.<sup>[2], [3], [4], [5]</sup>

- Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) has proposed the College For All Act, which would cancel all student debt and make community college, trade schools, apprenticeships, and public four-year universities tuition-free.[\[7\]](#)
- Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), through her Affordable Higher Education For All Act, would cancel most student debt and make public four-year colleges tuition-free for all—a very similar plan to Senator Sanders.[\[8\]](#)
- Representative Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) is a cosponsor of Senator Sanders’ College For All Act.[\[9\]](#)
- South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg indicates he would make public colleges free for up to 80 percent of families.[\[10\]](#)
- Entrepreneur Andrew Yang supports reforming the student loan system to include income-based repayments, whereby students pledge 10 percent of their salary for 10 years.[\[11\]](#)

The central theme in these policy proposals is that they are solely concerned with financing mechanisms. Determining who pays the bill does nothing to address tuition inflation and the quality of higher education in America. Making college “free” and forgiving student debt only further shift the burden of the bill onto the taxpayer and do not make needed structural reforms.

### *Pell Grant Expansion*

Pell Grants are the main form of debt-free subsidies offered by the federal government for students. Hence, they are a popular tool among presidential candidates for providing students with financial aid that are not loans.

- Senator Bennet has broadly stated that he plans to replace student loans with Pell Grants to offer total debt-free financing for students.[\[12\]](#)
- Vice President Biden, Secretary Castro, Senator Klobuchar, and Mayor Buttigieg have proposed doubling the maximum value of Pell Grants and indexing them to inflation.[\[13\]](#)

While debt-free subsidies can help mitigate the high cost of degree-granting programs, they are treating the symptoms of an archaic system of higher education rather than making reforms that would incentivize institutions to lower costs and increase quality. Discussions and proposals in education need to move beyond pumping more taxpayer money into an unchanging system.

### *Apprenticeships*

In order to provide students with the skills they need to compete in the workforce of the future, educational programs and institutions need to be able to respond to economic as well as student needs, and apprenticeships are one way of doing that. Programs that provide students with job experience have been gaining attention and support in many places. Community colleges have been able to enter into partnerships with local employers to improve graduation rates as well as job placement for students.

A number of candidates have proposals focused on apprenticeships.

- Senator Klobuchar has proposed increasing federal support and funding for apprenticeships so states can create or expand tuition-assistance programs.[\[14\]](#)
- Vice President Biden suggests investing \$50 billion in state and local actors to identify and modernize training programs to meet the needs of high-demand fields.

- Senator Warren wants to increase federal funding for apprenticeships from \$200 million to \$20 billion.[\[15\]](#)
- As mentioned above, Senator Sanders plans to make short-term training and apprenticeship programs tuition-free in his College for All Act.
- Senator Bennet, and motivational speaker and author Marianne Williamson have also indicated their support for making technical degree and other short-term training programs tuition free.[\[16\]](#)

Candidates have recognized the importance of on-the-job experience while pursuing a degree or certificate. Rather than remove barriers to innovation and provide a greater menu of options to students, however, most plans involving apprenticeships focus simply on increasing federal spending.

## **Proposals on K-12 Education**

K-12 reform has certainly taken a back seat to student debt and free tuition in higher education, but as the election nears, candidates may need to take a stand on existing debates in this policy area. Several have made proposals in a few areas.

### *School Funding*

- Senator Warren is calling for \$450 billion in new Title I funding over 10 years, which is four times more than current funding levels.[\[17\]](#)
- Vice President Biden and Senator Sanders have also released similar plans to triple federal spending on Title I funding for disadvantaged students.[\[18\]](#)
- Senator Klobuchar, along with Secretary Castro and Representative Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI), support the federal government fully funding the Individual with Disabilities Education Act.[\[19\]](#)

### *School Choice*

School choice has become a polarizing issue. While there are legitimate questions about charter school outcomes and the pros and cons of different approaches to education, the conversation typically centers on increasing or decreasing funding. Candidate plans concerning charter schools range from tacit support to outright bans.

- Senator Sanders has vowed to ban for-profit charter schools and to halt federal dollars to charters until a national audit is conducted.[20]
- Senator Booker has a history of supporting charter schools, particularly in his hometown of Newark, but he has not included charters as part of his presidential policy platform.
- Senator Warren has supported a school-voucher system in the past, but she has since distanced herself from such policies. Like Sanders, Warren has vowed to end federal funding toward the expansion of charter schools by eliminating the Federal Charter Schools Program.
- The Obama-Biden Administration strongly supported charter schools. In May 2019, however, Vice President Biden stated that he does “not support any federal money for for-profit charter schools. Period.” [21]
- Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the latest to enter the Democratic presidential primary, has traditionally supported charter schools. While he has yet to release his policy platform, during his tenure as mayor the number of charters in New York City grew from 22 to 159.[22]

### *Student Outcomes and Legislation*

Discussion about K-12 education should focus on student achievement and the state of public and private schools. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that of all 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in the United States, only 45 percent were able to read or do math at a proficient level. These measures have not changed since the last time the NAEP was conducted in 2009.[23] Over a decade of reforms has seemingly done little to improve student outcomes.

While candidates have not offered concrete proposals, the issues remain. Legislation such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, which replaced No Child Left Behind, and Common Core Standards (implemented in 2009) may come under renewed scrutiny as conversations surrounding achievement and workforce preparation become more important. Questions about whether recent policy changes have accomplished what they set out to do could spur alternative accountability and standardization measures into candidate policy platforms as Election Day nears.

### **Conclusion**

With less than year before the 2020 presidential election, various candidates have begun to reveal where they stand on education policy. The rising cost of college and student debt are the most visible issues related to education, so it should be no surprise that what little has been said or proposed centers around these issues.

While these issues are important and merit attention, the candidates’ education platforms lack provisions which address the fundamental causes of stagnant quality and increasing costs in education. Simply expanding the role of the federal government and how much it spends on education does not signal fundamental structural reform. As the 2020 election draws closer, expect to see more detailed plans on education policy, and hopefully plans that offer more than funding proposals.

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/20/us/politics/democratic-debate-issues.html>

[2] <https://joebiden.com/education/>

- [3] <https://issues.juliancastro.com/people-first-education/>
- [4] <https://medium.com/@AmyforAmerica/senator-klobuchars-many-paths-to-success-post-secondary-education-plan-8df6bf538727>
- [5] <https://corybooker.com/issues/college-and-workforce-training/>
- [6] <https://michaelbennet.com/education/>
- [7] <https://berniesanders.com/issues/free-college-cancel-debt/>
- [8] <https://elizabethwarren.com/plans/affordable-higher-education>
- [9] <https://www.nasfaa.org/2020>
- [10] <https://peteforamerica.com/policies/education/>
- [11] <https://www.nasfaa.org/2020>
- [12] Ibid
- [13] Ibid
- [14] Ibid
- [15] <https://medium.com/@teamwarren/a-plan-for-economic-patriotism-13b879f4cfc7>
- [16] Ibid
- [17] Ibid
- [18] <https://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/education2020/index.html>
- [19] Ibid
- [20] <https://www.thenation.com/article/bernie-sanders-public-education-plan/>
- [21] Ibid
- [22] <https://www.brookings.edu/research/school-choice-and-school-performance-in-the-new-york-city-public-schools-will-the-past-be-prologue/>
- [23] <https://www.americanactionforum.org/multimedia/eakinomics-the-national-assessment-of-educational-progress/>