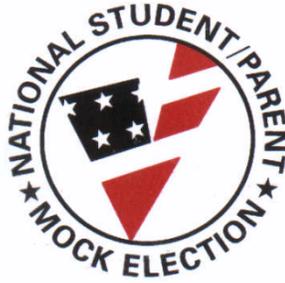




2014 Issues Guide:
Educational Issues in the 2014 Elections

Written for the National Student/Parent Mock Election

www.nationalmockelection.org



Teacher's Guide to Education Issues in the 2014 Elections

Introduction:

This is not a teacher's guide about how to teach. Contrary to the positions of some candidates, there is no standardized answer to that. It is instead intended to examine the educational issues being exploited to attract votes in the 2014 elections and to develop the critical thinking skills of young students.

Education reform goes back at least as far as Socrates; the flavor of the week may be effective but not popular, or vice versa. Few if any candidates seem to be running on platforms of less education, but "more education" begs the questions of who, what, why, when, where, and how. And in politics, the most important questions are often cost and control. Who pays? How do we measure results? *Education* is a \$\$1.2 trillion *industry* in the *U.S.*, second only to health care. If it is going in the wrong direction, how does anyone on the Ship of State change course? Should that course be set by federal, state, or local interests? Are we going full speed ahead in circles?

In addition to this guide, also see previous National Student/Parent Mock Election teacher's guides to education. Please note that some web links in earlier guides no longer work.



Topics for discussion and activities:

James Madison said: "A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both." Education must produce more than efficient worker units; it must enable voters in a democracy to know how to acquire and analyze the information they need to make intelligent decisions about how they are governed. Yet the Constitution says nothing specifically about education.

In an agrarian society, a basic primary school education was usually adequate. A few decades ago, a

high school diploma was enough for most people. Today, it takes a college education to be able to program a remote control.

What should be the goals of education today? What knowledge and values do we want to convey to our citizens? Are we trying to produce a uniform product (the 19th Century "Factory Model" of education) or individualists, students who follow authority or question it, cultural uniformity or diversity, absolute or relative moral values, etc.? If we can't quantify many of these concepts, how do we measure them? In addition, we are educating students today for an unknown future. Twenty-five years ago, there was almost no internet. Twenty-five years from now, we may be downloading knowledge directly into the brain. Are students getting the education they need for the future?

In addition to a changing society, there are also constant changes in what students want to learn versus what teachers want to teach, versus what parents or government officials think everyone else should be doing. Educating students for a future society involves guesswork about its parameters; if we guess wrong then the education is a failure, but how do we determine that now?



Mark Twain supposedly said "I never let my schooling interfere with my education." There are many ways and places to learn, including on the job and in cyberspace. Yet we persist in trying to tweak a public school system that fails up to 50% of students, depending on which statistics you choose -- dropout rates, standardized tests, etc. When is the result No Child Left Standing?

Do we need better standards? More testing? Better teacher training? Privatization? More money? Fewer kids in a class? More computers? Individualized instruction? Accountability? Parental involvement? Robots? How do we decide when we don't know where we are going?

When we try to decide what should and should not be taught in public schools, most people agree on the three R's and civic awareness, but beyond that there is great disagreement. However, education is more than the sum of its parts; specifying the parts alone is an inadequate approach. By concentrating on curriculum, we are always trying to catch up with new knowledge and a changing society. How can we define an appropriate educational process and not just its results?

One definition, attributed to several people, is that: "Education is what you have left over after you have forgotten everything you learned in school." It is not a body of knowledge, but the possession of the skills necessary to relearn what you have forgotten, and to acquire new learning. Why do we prefer to measure cognitive knowledge instead of the ability to learn? What should we do about students (or teachers) who have that ability but don't use it?

Once we decide what should be taught, how much should governments spend on education, vs. students, teachers, or parents? Education is expensive, but lack of education is even more expensive to society.

How do we fund it? What do the 2014 candidates propose?



When education fails to meet whatever goals we think it should have, people and politicians look for someone to blame. Is it the fault of federal mandates, Common Core, teachers, administrators, unions, bureaucracy, teacher training, federal and state judges, inefficiency, the curriculum, uncontrollable students, overcontrolling parents, the End of the World as We Know It, rock music, television, the internet, artificial sweeteners, Windows XP, space aliens, etc.? How do we determine where the problems are? How do we implement solutions?

How did we decide on our current public education system? Trace its development from colonial times to progressive reforms and the beginning of the Space Age. When and why did we decide we had to be competitive against other countries in educational success? Why hadn't we worried about it before? How was this a change from the use of public education to "Americanize" immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Has American education always had political implications? What are they today?

In 1983, a report called "A Nation at Risk" was issued by the Reagan Administration. It found that U.S. students were falling behind those in countries like Japan, unprepared for jobs requiring technology, often functionally illiterate, and attending crumbling schools. Yet complacency often prevented progress. Five solutions were proposed:

- Improving content
- Raising standards
- Reforming the teaching profession
- Extending the school day and year
- Improving leadership and financial resources

How are these objectives still being implemented? What did they ignore, like socioeconomic factors and pre-kindergarten preparation? Can systematizing reforms be done without a "one size fits all" approach, or does everyone become another brick in the wall? What has happened to public schools since 1983, with variations such as charter schools, distance learning, blended learning, alternative schools, home schooling, "unschooling," etc.?



Expectations have increased; have results kept pace? There have always been socioeconomic differences among students; now there is also a “digital divide.” Yet giving students computers is not always the answer if they use them mostly to play games (surprise!) or check social media. How do we motivate students to learn and teachers to teach using new technology?

That technology also makes possible one of the biggest political hot potatoes in education – standardized testing. Obviously, education needs some kind of evaluation. Why are classroom tests and grades no longer enough? Should everybody meet the same standards regardless of ability or location? If so, how do we apportion responsibility? If some students are unprepared for a particular level, how do we remedy that without holding others back? That’s hardly a new problem, but how much responsibility should teachers and schools bear for student failures due to language or social barriers, family dysfunction, or other external factors? What are the positions of the 2014 candidates?

Standardized testing has been controversial for decades. Carl Rogers said: “I believe that the testing of the student's achievements in order to see if he meets some criterion held by the teacher, is directly contrary to the implications of therapy for significant learning.” If the tests themselves interfere with learning, how else can we measure student progress?

Any standardized testing is supposed to comply with two requirements: reliability and validity. A test should accurately measure its subject the same way in repeated trials. This is relatively easy with simple right or wrong answers like a spelling test, but no so easy with more abstract learning. What should we be testing for, and how should we use the results? Do standardized tests lead to standardized students or substandard teachers?



Starting in 2002, No Child Left Behind required evaluating schools in order to close educational achievement gaps, leading to widespread standardized testing and labeling schools as failing. Has NCLB worked? Are the tests valid, or are we just “teaching to the test” with students forgetting the material

afterwards? How can standardized testing perpetuate “the inoculation theory of education” – once you have had something, you never get it again? What happens if students or parents opt out of standardized tests?

More recent efforts such as A Race to the Top and Common Core supposedly address this problem by creating frameworks for building on successful learning. Are we providing the resources needed to implement them properly, including teacher training? These programs are controversial; why? Which objections are educational or political? Are schools, teachers, and students being unfairly judged when they do not meet the new standards? Should teachers get “merit pay” if their students are more successful? How should we measure achievement vs. improvement? Should public school teachers have the right to refuse to teach some students if they do not feel comfortable with them? Should they have the right not to adopt new curricula or methods if they feel they are using others successfully? Who decides, and how?

Again, what are the positions of the 2014 candidates? If they oppose Common Core, for example, what alternatives do they propose? There have recently been protests in Texas and Colorado about American History curricula that de-emphasize “negative aspects” and do not coordinate with the Advanced Placement curriculum. Are these legitimate local choices, or a return to the “mushroom theory of education” – make students happy by keeping them in the dark and feeding them manure?

What part of government is or should be most important when dealing with such issues – the U.S. or state departments of education, or local school boards? Most federal and state officials are appointed, not elected. Should this change? Do you know who your school board candidates are, and their positions?



President Obama said in 2009: “The source of America's prosperity has never been merely how ably we accumulate wealth, but how well we educate our people. This has never been more true than it is today. In a 21st-century world where jobs can be shipped wherever there's an Internet connection, where a child born in Dallas is now competing with a child in New Delhi, where your best job qualification is not what you do, but what you know -- education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success, it's a prerequisite for success....”

“Stemming the tide of dropouts will require turning around our low-performing schools. Just 2,000 high schools in cities like Detroit and Los Angeles and Philadelphia produce over 50 percent of America's dropouts. And yet there are too few proven strategies to transform these schools. And there are too few partners to get the job done....”

“So here's the bottom line: Yes, we need more money; yes, we need more reform; yes, we need to hold ourselves more accountable for every dollar we spend. But there's one more ingredient I want to talk about. No government policy will make any difference unless we also hold ourselves more accountable as parents -- because government, no matter how wise or efficient, cannot turn off the TV or put away the video games. Teachers, no matter how dedicated or effective,

cannot make sure your child leaves for school on time and does their homework when they get back at night. These are things only a parent can do. These are things that our parents must do.”

What else can we do? Most schools are still tied to a calendar designed for an agrarian society, with summer vacations to prepare for the harvest. Most are tied to a school day that coordinates with “office hours” in today’s 24/7 society, despite abundant evidence that tired students learn poorly, not to mention problems with tired teachers. Yet school sports and extracurricular activities, parental objections, lack of child care or bus resources or funding, and just plain inertia often interfere with adjusting the school day or year. How can we address this? What can you propose to the 2014 candidates?

What do children learn before they even get to school? President Kennedy said: “By the age of six the average child will have completed the basic American education.... From television, the child will have learned how to pick a lock, commit a fairly elaborate bank holdup, prevent wetness all day long, get the laundry twice as white, and kill people with a variety of sophisticated armaments.” How can we change that?

What are we not teaching in schools that we should be? With the current emphasis on areas like reading, math, STEM, etc. what has happened to music, arts, civic education, rhetoric, drama, cooking, etc? Does your school teach:

- How to compute taxes and fill out tax forms
- How to write a resumé
- How to balance a checkbook or bank statement
- How to apply for a loan
- How to buy a car, house, or other major purchase
- Procedures and rules of order at public meetings
- How to write a letter to the editor
- How to change a tire
- How to light a fire
- How to read a bus schedule, map, and compass
- How to plant a garden
- Or other “simple” tasks?

What other changes can we make in our public school systems? Is teacher tenure still necessary? Should higher education be free, as it is in some countries? Do we need brick and mortar schools at all for some subjects, or is the internet a better resource? How can governments help diversify our public school systems, for example with charter schools (for example: New Orleans) or homeschooling assistance (Alaska)? Who pays for it and how? Have your 2014 candidates taken any positions on these changes, or are they still standardized as a result of their own education?

What is being done in other countries that we can adopt? How does culture affect educational practices? With all the attention on education worldwide, why are there so through breakthroughs? What limits are imposed by the human brain? How much do teachers remember from their own education? What do they find useful later on, even if they did not appreciate it at the time – algebra, grammar, or Shakespeare, for example? Where will we find good teachers in the future?

For Further Information:

Educating Americans for the 21st Century:

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/specialreports/educating-americans-for-the-21st-century-180947544/>

