

Big differences in candidates' education plans [US] ^[1]

Author: Asimov, Nanette

Source: San Francisco Chronicle

Format: Article

Publication Date: 20 Oct 2008

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Here's the biggest difference between the education plans of presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama: \$18 billion.

That's how much more Democrat Obama says he'd spend than Republican McCain to transform schools, from quadrupling the number of kids eligible for public preschool programs to strengthening long-neglected science education. Obama claims he can implement his long list of reforms without raising the federal deficit.

McCain's package would add less than \$1 billion to the education budget. His message is about doing more with the nearly \$70 billion in federal education funding already flowing to California and the other states: giving principals more say over funds while redirecting cash to online schools, home schools and tuition vouchers.

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The stark differences between the candidates' education plans can best be seen in their vision for the nation's youngest children. While Obama would sink the bulk of his added funding into "a preschool agenda that begins at birth," McCain wants to improve efforts already under way.

"There is no shortage of federal programs targeted at early child care and preschool," says McCain's Web site, which advocates developing the best of what's out there.

Obama to boost Head Start

For example, if a Head Start program succeeds at preparing children for kindergarten, it might be dubbed a "Center for Excellence." It could become eligible for at least \$200,000 per year to expand and show other Head Starts how to do business.

Obama's Web site offers more details - and more dollars. Obama would plow \$10 billion into programs for children from birth to age 5. Among the proposals are tax credits for child care, more training for Head Start employees, funding for states that adopt universal preschool and quadrupling enrollment in "Early Head Start" for children under 4.

Asked why Obama would steer most of his education package toward children who have yet to set foot in school, campaign spokeswoman Nayyera Haq said that half of poor children start school two years behind their peers and rarely catch up. The idea, she said, is to try and close the gap before it begins.

"It's never too early," Haq said.

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- reprinted from the San Francisco Chronicle

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