

Primary watch: Ignoring early education [US]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As the Democratic primary campaign season rolls on—seemingly interminably—we've read news articles about every imaginable aspect of the campaign (and some we couldn't imagine).

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Yet we at Early Ed Watch have seen almost no coverage on a subject near and dear to our hearts—the candidates' proposals for early education. While it's certainly fascinating to hear about how children are helping Obama, we think voters would rather know what Obama—and his opponent Hillary Clinton—plan to do to help children learn.

Why should the media pay more attention to early education issues in the campaign?

First, both candidates have put forward big, expensive, and ambitious early education proposals. Both candidates have proposed spending \$10 billion a year to expand pre-kindergarten and other early education programs. That would be a huge investment. By way of comparison, the current federal investments in Head Start, Early Head Start, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, Even Start, and the IDEA programs for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers with disabilities combined total less than \$10 billion a year. Both Clinton and Obama are both proposing to nearly double federal investment in early childhood education!

Second, this is one issue where there are real policy differences between Clinton and Obama. The general consensus in this election has been that, for all the contention between the two Democratic frontrunners, their actual policy positions and most issues are quite similar. That's not true when it comes to early education. Sure, both Clinton and Obama propose spending a lot of money to educate young children. But there are big differences in what they want to spend that money on. Senator Clinton would focus investment on expanding access to high-quality pre-k for all four-year-olds, and would improve the quality of state pre-k programs. Senator Obama, by contrast, would allow states to use funds to improve childcare and education for children from birth through age five. His plan does not set standards for pre-k quality or pledge to make pre-k universal. These significant differences in the candidates' early education plans align with differences in their policy views on other issues—such as health care.

Third, the Democratic candidates' early education proposals mark a dramatic break from the Bush administration's record. Under the Bush administration, funding for Head Start and childcare programs stagnated, and the administration even sought cuts for some key programs. But Clinton and Obama are right in tune with the action in the states, where governors and legislators from both parties have been increasing early education investment. That's certainly true in Pennsylvania where, in 2007, Governor Ed Rendell and the legislature increased dedicated pre-k funding by \$75 million to serve an additional 11,000 three- and four-year-olds. Pennsylvania is also widely considered a national leader for its efforts to improve the quality of childcare for children from birth on.

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So why aren't the media paying attention to early education issues in this cycle? We can't say for sure. Numerous media critics have pointed out that campaign coverage tends to focus on the "horserace" and personalities more than policy issues. But part of the problem is that the candidates themselves aren't talking up their early education proposals all that much—a real missed opportunity, in our opinion.

Both candidates could benefit from talking more about early education issues. Highlighting early education would give Senator Clinton an opportunity to show off her distinguished record of work on early education and childcare issues over the past 35 years—as well as her clear passion for young children's education and welfare. As for Senator Obama, talking about his ambitious early education agenda might help him score points with women—a constituency where he needs to make inroads in order to seal the nomination. Polling data show that women, as a group, support early education investments.

With two weeks left until the Pennsylvania primary, both candidates still have a chance to tell voters about their early education agendas.

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