

EDUCATION REFORM NOW

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Official Written Testimony to the 2016 Democratic Platform

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Preface

The Democratic Party comprises a wide range of viewpoints on education policy. Key party constituencies have varied and sometimes conflicting positions on issues such as academic standards and assessments, public school choice, teacher tenure and other human capital policies, and school turnarounds. The Democratic Party Platform should strive to achieve consensus and reflect the party's values of equal educational opportunity for all.

Education, the Economy, and Jobs

Democrats believe that getting a quality education is the surest path to the middle class, giving all students the opportunity to fulfill their dreams and contribute to our economy and democracy. Public education is one of our critical democratic institutions. We are committed to ensuring that every child in America has access to a world-class public education so we can out-educate the world and make sure America has the world's highest proportion of college graduates by the year 2020.

This requires investing in excellence at every level of our education system, from early learning through post-secondary education. It means we must lift achievement overall, and crucially, close the achievement gaps in America's schools in order to ensure that every child - regardless of race, family income, country of origin, or zip code - benefits from high-quality educational opportunities.

In this election cycle, Republicans have offered few proactive plans to improve outcomes for our kids - just one to roll back benchmarks that tell us whether schools are offering the quality education all students deserve. And they've nominated a candidate whose only foray into education is a fraudulent scheme currently facing litigation, which lured students with false promises and robbed them of thousands of dollars. American students and their families would suffer greatly if those policies and practices were carried into the Oval Office.

Assessments and Accountability

We've learned much over the past two decades about how to use assessments and accountability systems to boost student achievement and turn around low-performing

schools. Data obtained through standardized tests are particularly important in ensuring equity in education because such data are an objective source of information for both parents and policymakers about disparities in educational outcomes. These data can be and are used to advocate for greater resource parity in schools and fairer treatment of students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners. Research shows that assessment-driven accountability systems leverage additional funding for schools, improve student learning in academic subjects like math and reading, and help narrow achievement gaps.

We also have learned some things about the limitations, and potential unintended consequences, of educational testing. Some parents are concerned about the over-emphasis on academic test outcomes in their children's schools to the detriment of other equally important aspects of a well-rounded education including social and emotional development, physical health, art, and music. Others feel that, in some instances, too many policymaking decisions are made on the basis of a single test.

Democrats in Congress led the way in enacting important provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act that address and balance these considerations and concerns. While maintaining annual tests in math and reading and requiring interventions in schools where students as a whole or those from historically disadvantaged subgroups fail to make sufficient academic progress, this new federal law also recognizes the importance of measuring students and schools using multiple measures where academic assessments are complemented by other data about student success and school quality.

Teachers

We Democrats honor our nation's teachers, who do a heroic job for their students every day. If we want high-quality education for all our kids, we must listen to the people who are on the front lines. Our party must help elevate the teaching profession by raising standards for the programs that prepare our teachers and ensuring that every child has an effective teacher by attracting and rewarding great teachers, especially in schools where they're most needed.

We believe that teachers and other school personnel have, as do their peers in other fields and professions, the right to collectively bargain. So-called "right to work" laws, in and outside public education, are a thinly veiled attempt to destroy unions and collective bargaining. We are determined to keep standing up for collective bargaining rights and not allow the Republican Party to use platitudes about education to hide their ulterior motives to undermine unions as a whole.

Infrastructure

We cannot expect our children to feel valued and realize their full potential if we force them to continue to attend classes in cramped schoolrooms in outdated and rundown buildings. Too many schools are in such bad physical shape that they cannot even begin to offer students the kind of high-quality education that will competitively prepare them for the demands of a global, technologically advanced modern economy. Democrats support new investments in building, renovating, and modernizing school facilities to create good-

paying jobs and ensure every child is college and career-ready upon graduating high school.

Public School Choice

Families with the financial means to choose where they live based on the quality of schools enjoy an advantage not available to those of lesser means. Yoking school assignments to neighborhoods with differing family incomes perpetuates and exacerbates the effects of socioeconomically segregated housing. If a parent has to move in order to enroll their child in a better school, then public education will remain a mere extension of private property rights. We Democrats will continue to work to strengthen all our schools and to expand high-quality public school options for low-income youth that transcend geographical boundaries, including inter-district public school choice, magnet schools, charter schools, teacher-led schools, and career academies.

A Note on Charter Schools

We don't expect the party platform to get too far into the details of any specific education policy area. But because we have seen some misstatements about public charter schools during the 2016 campaign thus far, we want to make sure none of them makes its way into the party's official platform. Here are some misconceptions about public charter schools that the Platform Drafting Committee should be aware of in its deliberations:

Misconception #1: Charter schools can refuse to serve hard-to-teach students.

Charter school students are admitted by lottery when applicants exceed available slots. By law, charter schools must have a fair and open admission process, conducting outreach and recruitment to all segments of the community they serve. They are public schools and cannot select which students attend.

- Nationally, on average, there is no [difference](#) in the percentage of English Language Learner (ELL) students served between public charter and non-charter public schools;
- 37% of public charter schools have at least 75% of their students in [poverty](#) as compared to 23% of traditional public schools;
- Nationally, charter schools on average serve a [higher-percentage](#) of low-income students (57%) than do district-run schools (52%);
- In New York City, charter public schools do a better job of [retaining](#) students with disabilities than their non-charter public school counterparts. Specifically, 53% of charter school kindergarteners with disabilities were still in the same schools 4 years later, compared with 49% of non-charter schools.

Misconception #2: The original purpose of public charter schools was limited to their serving as laboratories for testing new ideas that could be adopted by traditional public schools.

AFT President Al Shanker, December 11th, 1991, : “What we really need - at the very least – are statewide curriculum frameworks and statewide assessment systems. Then, students and teachers in every school will know what kids are responsible for learning and whether or not they have learned it. And we should add statewide incentive systems that link getting into college or getting a job with achievement in high school. Once those things are in place, why limit charter schools to five or ten or a hundred? Why shouldn’t every school be a charter and enjoy the kind of autonomy now being offered to only a few?”

Misconception #3: Evaluations of charters at the national level show that charter schools perform no better than traditional schools.

Research clearly shows that students attending public charter schools, particularly those from historically disadvantaged groups, make more progress in academic subjects than their peers in traditional public schools.

- Nationally, on average, black students in charter schools gain seven additional days worth of learning in reading compared to their counterparts enrolled in traditional public schools;
- Nationally, low-income students in charter schools gain 14 additional days of learning in reading as compared their low-income peers in traditional public schools; the advantage in math for low-income students in public charter schools as compared to their counterparts in traditional public schools is 22 additional days of learning;
- English language learners in public charter schools gain an additional 43 days of learning in reading and an additional 36 days of learning in math.
- There are differences between states and localities in charter school performance that are masked when one examines only national averages.. Of 27 states studied by the CREDO Project at Stanford University (2013):
 - In 11 states, public charter students made greater academic progress than their traditional public school counterparts in *both* reading and math: District of Columbia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Tennessee.
 - In 8 states, charter students made relatively less academic progress than their counterparts in traditional schools in *both* math and reading: Arizona, Arkansas, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Utah.
 - Studies of major *cities* by CREDO show higher performance relative to traditional public schools. Across 41 regions, urban charter schools on average achieve significantly greater student success in both math and reading, which amounts to 40 additional days of learning growth in math and 28 days of additional growth in reading.

- In the S.F. Bay Area, Boston, D.C., Memphis, New Orleans, New York City and Newark, public charter schools students significantly outperform their traditional public school peers in math. In the S.F. Bay Area, Boston, Memphis, Nashville, and Newark public charter school students significantly outperform their traditional public school peers in reading.

Separate studies by the and have found that charter school students are more likely to graduate from high school, go on to college, stay in college and have higher earnings in early adulthood.

Polls consistently that voters and parents support public charter schools. Support is particularly high in urban areas with high concentrations of Democratic voters. Democrats represent 20 of the 25 Congressional districts with the greatest number of students attending public charter schools.

College Affordability

Everyone on American soil and every American around the world with the talent, desire, and drive to pursue a quality higher education should be empowered to do so unencumbered by inability to pay or the prospect of crushing student loan debt. For more than 50 years, the Democratic Party has championed financial aid for students from needy and hard-pressed middle class families. We have more than doubled college access for those from low-income households and extended student loans and targeted higher education tax benefits to millions of middle class families. But for too many, tuition and student loan debt continue to increase at an unsustainable pace outstripping growth in median family income and making college unaffordable. Worse, nearly half of all students who begin a postsecondary certificate or degree program do not complete their studies, leaving them in the most vulnerable of financial circumstances – with difficult-to-repay student loan debt and without a certificate or degree enabling them to get a good paying job.

We believe every student that works hard in school and out should be guaranteed four promises: the opportunity to attend a four-year public college without taking loans for tuition and fees; the opportunity to attend a community college tuition-free; the ability to refinance federal student loans at low interest rates; and protection from for-profit and non-profit institutions of higher education that have abysmal completion or student-loan repayment rates overall or for discrete socioeconomic or racial subgroups. A meaningful commitment to diversity in higher education demands holistic assessment in admissions, ample financial aid, support for minority serving institutions, and accountability for state and college efforts with regard to student access, affordability, and success.