

Strong at Home, Respected in the World

The 2004 Democratic National Platform for America

IMPROVING EDUCATION

The simple bargain at the heart of the American Dream offers opportunity to every American who takes the responsibility to make the most of it. That bargain is the great source of American strength, because it unleashes the amazing talent and determination of our people. And as our people seize the opportunity to build a better life, they build a stronger country.

Today, our people compete with workers on every continent. Information flows across oceans. High wage jobs are more dependent than ever on high-level skills.

Now, as never before, education is the key to opportunity, essential to a strong America. So we believe in an America that offers the best education to all our children – wherever they live, whatever their background. Period.

We believe in an America where every child comes to school ready to learn. Where every student is held to high standards and every school has the resources and responsibility to meet those standards. Where every classroom has a great teacher and every student gets enough personal attention to foster a talent or overcome a difficulty. We believe in an America where every teenager completes a rigorous high school curriculum. Where every qualified young person who wants to go to college can afford it. And where every adult who needs additional job training can get it.

In President George Bush's America, our government ignores the shameful truth that the quality of a child's education depends on the wealth of that child's neighborhood. Our best public schools are the best schools in the world, but too many children go to schools that just don't work. Too many children who beat the odds and succeed in school can't afford to go on to college. And too many adults who need added training aren't able to get it.

For this White House, education is an easy promise – easy come, and easy go. When President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act, he said the right things – asking more from our schools and pledging to give them the resources to get the job done. And then he promptly broke his word, providing schools \$27 billion less than he had promised, literally leaving millions of children behind.

The President also gets a failing grade for higher education. Over the last three years, college tuitions have risen by 35 percent, pricing 220,000 students out of college. Yet while then-Governor Bush promised to increase college aid, President Bush tried to charge more for student loans and eliminate Pell Grants for 84,000 students.

John Kerry, John Edwards and the Democratic Party believe that a strong America begins at home with strong families, and that strong families need the best schools. We believe schools must teach fundamental skills like math and science, and fundamental values like citizenship and responsibility. We believe providing resources without reform is a waste of money, and reform

without resources is a waste of time. And we believe politicians who expect students to learn responsibility should start by keeping their own promises.

Meeting our responsibilities. Under John Kerry and John Edwards, we will offer high quality early learning opportunities, smaller classes, more after school activities, and more individualized attention for our students, particularly students with special needs, gifts, and talents. The federal government will meet its financial obligations for elementary and secondary education and for special education.

A great teacher in every classroom. Continuing the fight for reform, we will make an intensive effort to put a great teacher in every classroom. Nothing has a bigger impact than a teacher on the quality of a child's education. We need to do more to attract and retain teachers, more to encourage their excellence, and more to ensure that all teachers are offering high quality teaching. We must raise pay for teachers, especially in the schools and subjects where great teachers are in the shortest supply. We must improve mentoring, professional development, and new technology training for teachers, instead of leaving them to sink or swim. At the same time, we must create rigorous new incentives and tests for new teachers. We need new rewards for teachers who go the extra mile and excel in helping children learn. And teachers deserve due process protection from arbitrary dismissal, but we must have fast, fair procedures for improving or removing teachers who do not perform on the job.

Parents are our children's first and most important teachers, and they have a responsibility to participate in their children's education. We will help them do so by offering information and resources to better teach their children, whether reminding them about homework or attending a parent-teacher conference.

Securing high achievement for all. Vast achievement gaps persist in America. Nearly half of African-American, Latino, and American Indian youth don't graduate high school. We believe in the potential of every child and we will not accept this loss of talent. Because education in the earliest years of a child's life is critical, we will expand and improve preschool and Head Start initiatives with the goal of offering these opportunities to all children. Because children need safe, loving, and disciplined homes in order to learn, we will work on a bipartisan basis to reform foster care. And we will undertake a national campaign to raise graduation rates by raising student achievement, expecting more from schools, reaching out to troubled youth with mentoring and tutoring, and strengthening the basic high school curriculum. We will meet these challenges together—parents, teachers, principals, educational support professionals and paraprofessionals, along with universities, community-based and faith-based organizations.

Making schools work for children. We will use testing to advance real learning, not undermine it, by developing high-quality assessments that measure the complex skills students need to develop. We will make sure that federal law operates with high standards and common sense, not just bureaucratic rigidity. Instead of pushing private school vouchers that funnel scarce dollars away from the public schools, we will support public school choice, including charter schools and magnet schools that meet the same high standards as other schools. And at a time when so many schools charged with our future are relics of the past, we will build new schools and offer the technology and equipment for a 21st century education.

Making college affordable. With the leadership of John Kerry and John Edwards, we will make college more affordable, so that more young people get higher education, and more of those who graduate get relief from the crushing burden of debt. We will make student aid faster and simpler to get so students aren't scared off by the complicated process. We will offer generous tax credits to reduce the price of four years of college for all students, including those who pay their own way and can least afford college now. We will strengthen our aid programs for students while eliminating wasteful subsidies for lenders. At a time when all good jobs increasingly depend on advanced skills, we will strengthen technical training for those who do not attend college. Finally,

we must place a special emphasis on expanding achievement in math and science. These are subjects where America has always led the world and must continue to lead in the 21st century.

Teaching good citizenship and good values. We must remain committed to the moral and civic dimensions of education. Education requires the engagement of the whole community in order to teach the whole child. Students should learn responsibility in our schools, and students who are irresponsible—using drugs or bringing violence into schools—must face strict discipline. We should support character education in our elementary and secondary schools and community service as a condition of graduation from high schools. We should also give back to those who give to America, in the tradition of the G.I. Bill and AmeriCorps.

The promise of America is the promise of opportunity. If we are going to keep that promise, every child should have a great teacher and every high school graduate should have the chance to go to college. Nothing less is good enough for America.