



Frequently Asked Questions

General

Q: What are you asking me to sign onto? What will I be supporting?

A: We are inviting you to participate in a nonpartisan campaign to make education a top priority in the 2008 presidential election.

The campaign will not support or oppose any particular candidate for public office or any political party. Nor does it take positions on legislation.

Instead, the campaign will send a message that education is one of the critical issues for our time and must be addressed during the 2008 election by candidates from all political parties.

Q: What are you trying to accomplish?

A: First, we want to inform the campaigns and the American people on the hard facts about the status of American education and the creative possibilities for improvement.

Second, we want education to be a top domestic priority of the next administration—no matter who wins the presidency. To accomplish this, we want all presidential candidates and ultimately the next President of the United States to exhibit strong national leadership on the issue of educational improvement—not just giving a speech or passing federal legislation but issuing a Kennedyesque challenge to the American people to make our schools stronger and better.

Third, we want to see that three fundamental policy areas are addressed: American education standards, providing effective teachers in every classroom, and giving students more time and support for learning.

Q: Who is financing this campaign? How much money do you have?

A: Strong American Schools is financed by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, two of the largest philanthropic organizations in the world. The budget is estimated to be up to \$60 million over 18 months.

Q: Is Bill Gates really involved?

A: Yes. Bill and Melinda Gates and Eli and Edythe Broad have a longstanding commitment to improving education and they are very personally invested in this project. They believe it is critical for this nation to accelerate its commitment to educational improvement, and the time to begin is during this presidential election.

Q: How do you intend to influence the candidates?

A: During the campaign we will engage presidential candidates. We will use the full range of modern campaign tactics to increase the attention paid to education, including targeted field and grassroots efforts in primary states, a cutting-edge E-campaign, micro-targeting, and a national paid advertising strategy.

Q: Who is the audience for this campaign?

A: We are speaking directly to the presidential candidates and their staff members. But just as important, we are also speaking to every American with a stake in this issue—and that means every American, period. Education is the key to the economic and social health of this country and every community in it.

Q: Why do you think education is such an important issue?

A: The issues currently being debated on the campaign trail—national security, the environment, and health care—share a core underpinning. Each relies on education. Without a highly educated citizenry, our nation’s competitiveness and security will be undermined, and our ability to solve the most complex challenges of the day will be threatened. It’s also a moral issue. *All* students—no matter their race or income or neighborhood—should have the opportunity to attend a strong American school.

Q: How did you choose those three policy priorities?

A: These three issues are basic to educational progress. Standards: We need to clearly set expectations for learning before we can rationally organize resources, teachers, time, and support to get the job done. Effective teachers: After we set our goals, effective teaching is the most powerful force to help a student learn. It is not the only influence, but it is the most powerful. Time and support: Adequate time for learning and support for students is necessary to enable *all* students to reach the standards.

There are other issues. They also will be debated and discussed. But our focus is on these three basic elements because they are fundamental for improving schools and underlie all other educational programs and practices.

Q: I agree with some of your issues, but not all of them. Can I still be a part of this effort?

A: Yes. Our intention is to encourage a vigorous national debate on these issues so that the best solutions come to the surface. We are **not** trying to prescribe one narrow policy solution on any of these issues. We need your point of view.

Q: If I think another issue is more important than these three issues, should I still sign on?

A: Yes. We know these three issues are not the only educational issues of importance to many Americans. Other issues will undoubtedly be debated, and we encourage that.

But we want to make sure that these three issues are on the table and part of the debate over the course of the 2008 election.

Q: I'm for/against vouchers. Where do you stand on vouchers?

A: We do not take any official stand on vouchers—either for or against.

We know there is a vigorous debate about vouchers—just as there are debates about many issues. This campaign cannot address them all. Rather than addressing every issue, we are focusing on three issues that should not get left out of the debate during the 2008 presidential election.

Q: Don't you think early childhood education is more important?

A: Early childhood programs are important, but so is K-12 education. Research shows that students who attend good early childhood programs but end up in low-quality elementary schools fall behind anyway.

We shouldn't have to choose between offering early childhood programs and giving students great elementary, middle, and high schools. It's not an either-or proposition.

Q: You talk a lot about 1 million students dropping out every year. Will those three policy aims improve graduation rates?

A: Some people believe that students drop out for personal reasons that schools can't do anything about. But dropouts are much more likely to say they left because they were bored in school or falling behind in their classes than because of family or personal circumstances.

Researchers have shown that some schools have much greater "holding power" than others—particularly those with a more focused, academically challenging curriculum, and more supportive relationships between teachers and students.

And students are less likely to drop out when they enter high school with good math and reading skills. Based on that research, we believe that strengthening schools along these lines will significantly reduce dropout rates.

Q: Where do you stand on the No Child Left Behind Act?

A: Strong American Schools does not take positions on any specific piece of legislation.

The issues promoted by Strong American Schools need to be part of any discussion that involves education reform—at the local, state, and national levels.

Whatever the Congress decides about No Child Left Behind, America will need strong presidential leadership to focus on the challenge of providing all students with rigorous American education standards, effective teachers, and time and support for learning.

Q: Do you have a bill in Congress that you support?

A: No. Strong American Schools will not take a position on any specific piece of federal legislation.

Q: Does Strong American Schools generally favor Democrats or Republicans?

A: We do not favor one party over another or one candidate over another.

We believe that **every single candidate** needs to address America’s education challenge with creative solutions and strong presidential leadership. Our goal is to build a drumbeat of support for vigorous action after the election, no matter who becomes president.

Q: Will you endorse a candidate at some point?

A: No. Strong American Schools will not endorse or support any candidate from any party.

Q: If a candidate endorses you or endorses your ideas, does that mean you support him or her?

A: No. We are calling on **all candidates** to tell voters how they intend to improve education. Due to tax and election laws, we cannot support or oppose any specific candidate or political party.

Q: Since you are focusing your campaign on a presidential election, do you expect the solutions to require federal mandates?

A: No. We are focusing on a presidential election because we believe the next president should inspire and lead Americans at all levels—state, national, and local—to work together to improve schools. Education is primarily a state and local responsibility. But together, states and localities form a nation and the president is the leader of a nation. This is an *American* problem that affects us all. There are ways other than mandates that Presidents can affect change. For example, the Teacher Incentive Fund provides support to states and school districts that adopt pay for performance programs.

American Education Standards

Q: What are standards?

A: Standards are a description of what should be learned, grade by grade, to prepare a student for life after high school, including college and good-paying jobs. For example, fourth grade math standards provide a description of the math skills that should be taught and learned in fourth grade. Standards should be rigorous enough to prepare all students to be successful adults, but they are a floor rather than a ceiling. Schools can teach students more knowledge and skills than the standards call for or inspire students to achieve at a higher level than the standards demand.

Q: What do you mean by “American standards”?

A: We have 50 states, but we are one nation. **All** American students should learn basic skills that prepare them for college, for the workplace, and for life—no matter where they live and who their parents are. However, state standards are uneven. Some are very rigorous and some are very weak. To keep America competitive, standards should be benchmarked to the best in the world so that we are raising standards, not lowering them. The problem is not that we expect too much from our students or schools, it is that we settle for too little. That’s what we mean when we talk about American education standards—expectations worthy of us and our children, standards that are the foundation for a better future and that prepare our young people to succeed in life.

Q: Does that mean national standards mandated by the federal government?

A: No. There are many possible ways to arrive at agreement on American education standards, and that is part of the debate we hope to encourage. To provide just one example, some have proposed that national leaders offer support to states that agree to raise their standards to match real-world demands students will face after high school, or states that volunteer to work together to arrive at more consistent standards for students across the nation.

Q: Are you advocating a national curriculum?

A: No. Some people use the terms “standards” and “curriculum” interchangeably, but in reality there is a big difference between them. Standards describe the knowledge and skills that all students should learn by the end of each grade. Curriculum provides detailed instructions for how to teach those things in the classroom, such as lesson plans and materials.

Q: Do you want the federal government to tell my local schools what they should teach? What about local control?

A: No. States and local communities are responsible for educating students, and that must be respected. The aim is *not* to “nationalize” the curriculum in each grade by having Washington officials dictate a lesson plan for every school in the country. We are simply saying that it should be an American priority to give all students the opportunity to learn what they need to meet the real-life challenges they will face after high school. There are many ways that national and state leaders can work together to accomplish that.

Q: What about teacher creativity?

A: Standards help teachers keep all students on track to graduate with the skills they need. But they do not dictate how to teach. Standards might say that fourth graders should learn how to multiply and divide fractions, but there are many creative approaches teachers can use to teach that skill. Flexible teaching techniques and approaches that are effective have never been more important. If we get to greater agreement on American standards, teachers will be able to share their creative strategies with colleagues in more places around the country.

Q: Are American standards the same thing as No Child Left Behind?

A: No. No Child Left Behind is a federal law governing a large number of programs. As part of that law, states were required to test students in grades 3-8 based on their own state standards. What we want is for states to adopt high standards regardless of whether they do it for their own state accountability systems or the one required by No Child Left Behind. We are calling for rigorous American education standards so that all students, no matter where they live, receive a quality education that prepares them for college, for work, and for life. Whether they live in New Hampshire or Nevada, Maine or Mississippi, all students need strong basic skills in subjects like math and English.

Q: What about students who do not learn as fast as others?

A: All children can learn. Some just might need extra help or more time to learn, which is why one of our priorities is providing students with extra support and time for learning. The standards should set a common minimum expectation for all students, but we might need to give some students more time and more individual help to achieve them.

Effective Teachers in Every Classroom

Q: Are you just calling for “merit pay”?

A: No. By “merit pay,” people usually mean paying teachers more if their students get high scores on standardized tests at the end of the year. We believe teacher performance in the classroom should be measured, and superior results should be rewarded. But there are fairer and more accurate ways to do that now. For example, in the more than 130 schools across the country using the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), teachers can earn more based on how much their students learn in the classroom over the course of the school year, how much the school improves overall, and how well they perform on observations of teaching skills that take place 4-6 times per year.

We also believe it’s important to provide incentives to get effective teachers in low-performing schools or shortage areas, much as places like Chattanooga and Denver are doing.

Q: Is it fair to judge teachers by student test scores? Don’t students come in at different levels?

A. Over the last decade there has been great progress developing fairer and more accurate ways to measure a teacher’s impact on student learning. Those methods are usually called “value-added” because they take into account a student’s skills upon entering a teacher’s classroom and then look at how much the student gained by the end of the year.

We recognize that many teachers have concerns about performance incentives based on student learning. But when teachers are asked about incentives based on learning *gains* rather than simple year-end test scores, their support goes up. In a 2003 poll by Public Agenda, 50 percent of new teachers rated such a proposal as “excellent” or “good,” compared with only 15 percent who rated it as “poor.”

At the same time, value-added approaches are not a replacement for assessments that measure student proficiency with American standards. They are one component in a system of evaluation tools.

Q: Do you want to raise teacher salaries?

A: Over time we need to raise the compensation for teachers to attract the best talent to the profession. But we believe that should be done as part of a comprehensive rethinking of how we compensate teachers—including their performance and their willingness to take on tougher assignments. Recent college graduates believe teachers are underpaid, but they also believe that teaching does not offer enough opportunities for advancement based on hard work and results. We should try to solve both of those problems at the same time.

Q: Your issues are only part of the picture. Aren't there a lot of other things you need to do to improve teaching?

A: Yes. Around the country, states and local districts are working on a range of issues related to teaching: Improving teacher preparation, providing better ongoing training, modernizing licensure and certification. We applaud all of those efforts.

But we also believe that leaders need to find ways to value teachers by rewarding those who produce superior results or take on challenging assignments. Few other professions would pay less to a high-performing employee than a low-performing employee simply because the high-performer has less experience. And few professions would routinely give the toughest jobs to their weakest members, as education often does.

Q: Are you for alternative certification?

A: Alternative certification and alternative routes to teaching have their place. We believe those options should demand excellence and deliver teachers who are effective over time.

Q: Are you trying to get rid of teacher tenure?

A: No.

We recognize that there is a vigorous debate about teacher tenure, with strong feelings on both sides. But that debate does not touch on the issues we want presidential candidates to address.

More Time and Support for Learning

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: We need to provide successful and struggling students alike more time for in-depth learning and greater personal attention.

One good example comes from Massachusetts, which is giving ten schools in five communities the resources to provide students with 30% more time for learning. Some are expanding the school day, while others are lengthening the year. But they are all reinventing the entire education program to be richer, deeper, and more engaging. They are providing things like these:

- More and better instruction in math, reading, history, and science;
- Personalized attention for students who need it;
- Enrichment activities in subjects like arts, music, and drama; and
- Opportunities for teachers to work together to improve student learning.

Q: Do you want to get rid of summer vacation?

A: No.

Even if states or communities decide to adopt a longer year, there would still be time for summer vacation. And there are other ways to expand time, including adding hours to the school day.

Q: Do you want to get rid of recess?

A: No. In fact, extending the school day or the school year makes it easier for schools to preserve recess and other kinds of enrichment activities beyond the core academic curriculum.

Q: What about after-school activities?

A: Enrichment activities are important. Places like Massachusetts that are experimenting with new kinds of educational schedules have learned valuable lessons about how schools can provide more and better academic instruction while preserving time for enrichment activities. For example, the Martin Luther King Jr. School in Cambridge has incorporated 30 minutes per day for enriching elective courses that students helped design, in addition to an extra 2 ½ hours per week for math, for reading, and for science.

Q: It seems like schools waste a lot of time. Can't you just get them to use time more efficiently instead of adding more?

A: We recognize that many schools could make more efficient use of the time they already have. Leaders should find ways to give school administrators the tools to conduct "time audits" and the expert advice to use time more efficiently. Making better *use* of time should go hand in hand with efforts to provide more of it