



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## EDUCATION DEBATE: Obama and Romney Highlight Education Positions During First Presidential Debate

Although moderator **Jim Lehrer** of “**PBS NewsHour**” did not select education as one of the six segments on which the two candidates would focus during the first presidential debate, both President Barack Obama and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney devoted a significant amount of time to the issue. The topic of education was also popular among debate viewers, enough so that education-related messages [ranked first on Twitter](#), besting health care, jobs, and the economy. And while Romney’s [comment about Big Bird](#) had a lot of people talking the day after the debate, education observers were focused on Romney’s pledge not to cut education funding.



During the October 3 debate in Denver, Colorado, each candidate outlined a multiple-point plan for creating jobs and boosting the economy that included a focus on education. Obama’s plan includes investments in education and training, developing new sources of energy, changing the tax code to help small business and American companies, and reducing the deficit. Romney’s plan also focused on energy, deficit reduction, and small business, as well as ensuring that “our people have the skills they need to succeed and the best schools in the world,” Romney also said he would open up trade, particularly in Latin America.

When asked for specifics on his plan, Obama cited “enormous progress” in improving the nation’s education system, specifically saying that Race to the Top “prompted” forty-six states to raise standards, a reference to the Common Core State Standards that were developed by the nation’s governors and chief state school officers. Obama added that he wanted to hire 100,000 new math and science teachers, create 2 million more slots for students at community colleges, and keep college tuition low.

Obama also called for a larger role for business in education reform. Specifically, he would like to see businesses partner with community colleges and set up training programs that would prepare students for jobs. “One of the things I suspect Governor Romney and I probably agree on is getting businesses to work with community colleges so that they’re designing training

programs,” Obama said. “And people who are going through them know that there’s a job waiting for them if they complete it.”

Romney agreed on the importance of education, saying it was “key” to the future of the nation’s economy, but he implied that too much federal overhead was limiting progress. Pointing out that the federal government has forty-seven training programs, Romney said he would “get those dollars back to the states” so they could go to workers who could “create their own pathways” to the training they need.

One chief point of contention between the two candidates was Romney’s economic plan, which, Obama said, includes \$8 trillion in new tax cuts and military spending and would require a cut in the federal education budget by up to 20 percent.

“That kind of approach,” Obama said, “will not grow our economy, because the only way to pay for it without either burdening the middle class or blowing up our deficit is to make drastic cuts in things like education, making sure that we are continuing to invest in basic science and research, all the things that are helping America grow. And I think that would be a mistake.”

In response, Romney made the statement that got education advocates’ attention more than any other. “I’m not going to cut education funding,” Romney said. “I don’t have any plan to cut education funding ...”

Romney then turned the tables on Obama and pointed to Obama’s own budget, which, Romney said, put \$90 billion into green jobs. “I’m all in favor of green energy,” Romney said. “\$90 billion—that would have hired 2 million teachers.”

While saying that the primary responsibility for education is at the state and local levels, Romney acknowledged that the federal government can “play a very important role.” He congratulated **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** for pursuing Race to the Top and said he agreed with some—not all—of the ideas associated with it.

At the same time, Romney implied a preference for vouchers, saying he wanted low-income children receiving Title I funds and students with disabilities receiving IDEA funds to be able to go to the school of their choice. “So all federal funds, instead of going to the state or to the school district,” Romney said, “I’d have [the funds] follow the child and let the parent and the child decide where to send their student.”

Romney said he would help schools be more competitive by grading them and helping parents know which schools are succeeding and failing so parents can take their children to schools that are more successful. “I don’t want to cut our commitment to education,” Romney said. “Massachusetts schools are ranked number one in the nation. This is not because I didn’t have commitment to education. It’s because I care about education for all of our kids.”

Video of the debate is available at <http://www.youtube.com/thevoiceof>. A transcript is available at <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-3-2012-debate-transcript>.



## **“EDUCATION DRIVES AMERICA”: Education Secretary Duncan Reports on Cross-Country Bus Tour, Offers Education Reform Goals for the Future**

In an October 2 speech at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** reflected on his cross-country bus tour, which included more than 100 events in a dozen states across the country, and outlined education reform goals for the future, saying now is “no time to retreat,” but that it is time to “double down” on what is working.

“Above all, what I picked up on the bus tour is an abiding faith in the power of education to change lives for the better,” Duncan said of the [“Education Drives America” tour](#). “People know that education is not only the best way to end poverty and build a strong future—it’s really the only way.”

Duncan stressed that a high school diploma is no longer sufficient for a good job in today’s economy and urged every student to aim for some form of education beyond high school. He said the country’s economic security, as well as its national security, depends on how well the nation educates its students. “A strong military remains our best defense, but a strong education is our best offense,” Duncan said.

Duncan said people believe that investing in education is the “right way” out of the economic slowdown, but they worry about where the money will come from because school budgets are tight and resources are shrinking for counselors, school nurses, and other support staff, as well as for the arts, sports, and afterschool programs. He said an estimated 300,000 teachers have lost their jobs in the last two years, but he said there was “little appetite” in Congress to help.

He defended the additional flexibility under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that the Obama administration has granted to states through the waiver process and said that waivers are “not a pass on accountability but a smarter, more focused and fair way” to be held accountable.

“The fact is, many educators didn’t take NCLB seriously because it assumed all children start from the same place and learn at the same rate. That’s just not reality,” Duncan said. “And the record on NCLB is clear: performance is up slightly and achievement gaps have narrowed somewhat but not nearly enough. Under waivers, we will accelerate that pace.”

Duncan called Race to the Top a “fascinating lesson on the power of incentives,” noting that “we have seen as much reform in states that didn’t receive a nickel as in states that received tens of millions of dollars.” He called the Common Core State Standards a “game-changer” and said teacher evaluation must be based on “multiple measures” rather than a single test, adding that teachers “must be at the table” when it comes to building systems of evaluation and support. He said the nation must do more to serve low-income children and find the bipartisan will to address their needs and close the opportunity gap but lamented, “as a country, we’re not even close.”

Turning to the upcoming elections, Duncan said the choice facing voters is “pretty stark.” “Some people see education as an expense government can cut in tough economic times,” he said. “President Obama sees education as an investment in our future—the best investment we can make, especially in tough economic times.”

Looking ahead, Duncan outlined eleven goals, including high-quality early education for more low-income children; state-driven accountability that demands progress for all kids; a stronger partnership between teachers and technology; a new generation of math and science teachers; passage of the DREAM Act; reforming career education; and a close examination of the student financial aid system, among others.

“One of the big factors impeding the economic recovery is the lack of education,” Duncan said. “That’s why millions of jobs remain unfilled. Some 90 million adults in America have basic or below-basic literacy skills. A quarter of our kids never complete high school. What chance do they have to contribute in today’s economy? In fact, some say our dropout crisis has had the impact of a permanent national recession—the loss of human potential and productivity is staggering.”

He peppered his speech with success stories about turnaround schools and school districts and offered positive examples of how education can impact the lives of individuals. “Americans are desperately hungry for a quality education and willing to do just about anything to get one. They know what’s at stake for them, and for their families,” Duncan said. “They’re not asking for a handout—they want a hand up. They will work hard. They will give it everything they have. We owe them the same. And we owe our children much more.”

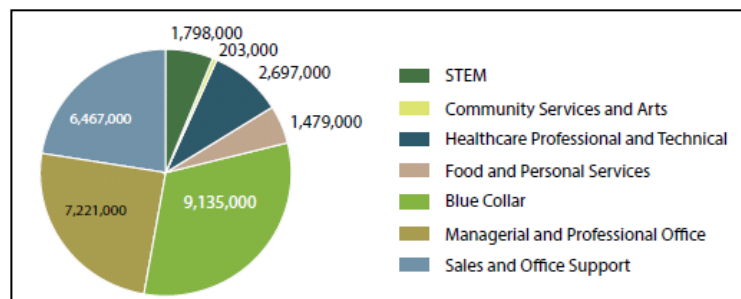
A transcript of Duncan’s speech is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/moving-forward-staying-focused>.



**FIVE WAYS THAT PAY ALONG THE WAY TO THE B.A.: New Report Examines Role of Career and Technical Education in Preparing Individuals for Nation’s Approximately 29 Million “Middle Jobs”**

A new report from Civic Enterprises and the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce examines how career and technical education (CTE) at both the high school and postsecondary levels can prepare individuals for the approximately 29 million “middle jobs” in the United States today. These jobs pay between \$35,000 and \$95,000 a year and are open to individuals who have education and training beyond high school but do not hold a bachelor’s degree. According to the report, *Career and Technical Education: Five Ways That Pay Along the Way to the B.A.*, middle jobs account for one in every five jobs in the American labor market and nearly half of all jobs that pay at least a middle-class wage.

As shown in the graph to the right, nearly half of middle jobs are in office occupations, such as marketing and sales managers, computer and information system managers, and postal service workers. Another third of middle-class jobs are in traditional blue-collar occupations, such as electrical power-line installers; aircraft



pilots, locomotive engineers, and miscellaneous plant and system operators.

“As jobs that require only high school or less have disappeared, postsecondary education and training on the job and in schools have become the gateways to the middle class,” the report notes. “Most postsecondary education and training discussions focus on the baccalaureate pathway, but there has been an increasing interest in so-called ‘middle jobs’ ... The education and training programs that prepare Americans for these jobs are commonly referred to as career and technical education.”

According to the report, the American career and technical education system is unique, flexible, and responds to changes in labor-market conditions. Unlike in other countries, it can provide individuals with opportunities to further their education and earn college degrees, promote career mobility as an avenue for lifelong learning, and provide retraining for workers who have seen their jobs shipped overseas or outmoded by technological advancements.

The report groups CTE into high school and postsecondary levels. It notes that CTE in high schools can provide students with career exploration and programs of study that align with postsecondary programs and employer-based training. It can also encourage students to persist until high school graduation and offer stronger transitions to postsecondary education. As the job market shifts toward requiring postsecondary education and training after high school, the terminal high school vocational degree has receded in favor of postsecondary alternatives.

More than high school CTE, postsecondary CTE can lead to a relatively good-paying jobs that also offer lifelong learning opportunities and career advancement.

Specifically, the report lists five major pathways that CTE provides toward the 29 million middle-class jobs: (1) employer-based training; (2) industry-based certifications; (3) apprenticeships; (4) postsecondary certificates; and (5) associate’s degrees. The report also details the specific occupations for which CTE prepares American workers.

The report makes policy recommendations for how the federal government can improve the nation’s CTE infrastructure:

- Invest CTE dollars in programs of study that align secondary and postsecondary curriculums, reduce duplication and remediation, allow for dual-enrollment, and create opportunities for students to learn and earn.
- Create a “Learning & Earning Exchange” that links high school and postsecondary transcript information about courses taken and grades with employer wage records. The report says such an information system would (1) help students understand the demand for specific kinds of education and training; (2) help educators reform their programs to better serve their students; and (3) help employers find the workers they need to fill their increasingly complex occupational needs.

The complete report is available at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/CTE.FiveWays.FullReport.pdf>.





## **THE COMPETITION THAT REALLY MATTERS: India and China Will ‘Race to the Top’ Unless U.S. Focuses on Education Policy, New Report Finds**

Compared to India and China, the United States lacks leadership and direction on education policy, according to a new report from the Center for American Progress and the Center for the Next Generation. It finds that China and India have designed strategic national plans that center around education policy, placing them in prime position to surpass the United States in global competitiveness.

“Economists of all stripes point to a robust pipeline of skilled workers as the essential ingredient of a strong and growing economy,” the report, *The Competition That Really Matters: Comparing U.S., Chinese, and Indian Investments in the Next-Generation Workforce*, notes. “The race for intellectual and innovative superiority will be won by the best and the brightest—no matter where they come from—and now, the talent pool is growing bigger than ever.”

There is no question that the United States has a rich history of graduating superior minds, but in recent years, progress has stagnated, the report finds. Educational attainment and achievement gaps persist, and in some places continue to deepen. These gaps are particularly disconcerting and harmful to future competitiveness because they disproportionately exist within African American and Hispanic communities. These minority groups will soon make up a majority of American children. If they are underserved in their education, how can America continue to lead in an increasingly globalized, skilled workforce?

They cannot, according to the report, noting that only half of U.S. children receive early childhood education, and there is no national strategy to increase that number. Additionally, a mere 76 percent of high school students receive a diploma.

Meanwhile, China and India continue to make great strides in improving their education systems. China committed to a strategic education strategy as part of its economic revitalization strategy in the 1970s. Since then, China has become the world’s largest provider of higher education and surpassed the United States in the number of college graduates focusing on science, math, engineering, and technology (STEM) fields in 2007. According to the report, China will have 200 million college graduates—more than the entire U.S. workforce—by 2030. Children in China begin studying a foreign language in third grade and continue through middle school, and teachers continue to be better qualified and equipped with higher degrees.

“China’s momentum and its education-focused economic strategy will make the country increasingly competitive in sophisticated industries—precisely those where U.S. workers now lead the competition,” the report notes.

Similar advancements are occurring in India. According to the report, India will graduate 20 million students from high school by 2017, nearly five times the number in the United States. Of course, having a significantly larger population helps India in this regard. The report notes India has tripled its education funding over the last two and a half decades and has placed a significant focus on early childhood education and on ensuring universal primary school enrollment.

With China and India’s robust education policies producing skilled, educated innovators and thinkers, will the United States continue to stagnate or rise to the challenges presented by these two developing powers?

To meet this dual challenge from China and India, the United States should focus more attention on early childhood education and keep its commitment to the Common Core State Standards, the report finds. It also recommends that the United States focus on teenage work experience—including work-based learning, such as apprenticeships and internships—and increase parental involvement in educational development. It calls on the president of the United States, in 2013, to convene the governors for a National Education Summit to create a strategic, visionary plan to move forward that will improve educational outcomes nationwide. “The problems in the United States ... are not due to a lack of understanding of how to improve and focus our school system,” the report notes. “The problems are related to the political will to do it.”

*The Competition That Really Matters* is available at <http://bit.ly/Qm7CHV>.

### ***AMERICA’S REPORT CARD: United States Receives Grade of C– on Child Well-Being***

The United States earned a C– on child well-being, according to *America’s Report Card 2012: Children in the U.S.*, a national report card released on October 10 by First Focus and Save the Children.

“We grade kids all the time,” said **Bruce Lesley, president of First Focus**. “It’s time to take responsibility as a nation for the decisions that determine whether kids can succeed. We can’t be satisfied with a C–, but raising the grade means getting involved, voting for kids, and holding politicians accountable.”

The report card assigned a letter grade to the United States in five key domains of a child’s life:

- Economic security, which is based on the number of children living in poverty, experiencing food insecurity and unstable housing: D
- Early childhood, which is based on early learning program availability and enrollment, as well as access to child care: C–
- K–12 education, which is based on children’s math, reading and science levels, school resources, the number of at-risk youth, and educational attainment: C–
- Permanency and stability, which is based on the well-being of children impacted by the child welfare, juvenile justice, and immigration systems: D
- Health and safety: which is based on the state of health insurance coverage for children, access to health care and preventive services, public health and safety, and environmental health: C+

The complete report is available at

<http://www.firstfocus.net/library/reports/americas-report-card-2012-children-in-the-us>.

***Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit <http://www.all4ed.org>.