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Politics vs. Education

What is one of the most important things in a child’s life? Although, this may be an opinion question, I believe the answer is education. Education is the basis of every person’s life. What children learn in school determines what they will do when they become adults. A determining factor of what will happen with the future of our education is the 2008 election. One way that our nation is trying to ensure that children get the education they deserve is by creating the No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB]*.* To guarantee that this act will be followed through and continues to influence our nation, we will have to choose the right presidential nominee who will plan to do that.

President George W. Bush signed the NCLB into law in 2002 to fulfill the need for better education requirements. With this act, Bush’s plan was to focus more on reading in elementary, so that when students reach the higher levels of education they hopefully will not struggle as much as they have in the past. Bush states, “[Too] many children in America are segregated by low expectations, illiteracy, and self-doubt. In a constantly changing world that is demanding increasingly complex skills from its workforce, children are literally being left behind.” President Bush was hoping to get rid of these problems by signing the NCLB, requiring many students to take annual tests throughout their education (Bush). The students would take these assessment tests every year to determine whether their school would pass the requirements. Bush planned to reward those schools that did well on these tests, but also punish those that did poorly.

According to national reading tests, nearly 70% of fourth grade students are having difficulty reading at a basic level and currently several college freshmen must take remedial courses before they can even begin taking the normal college courses. (Bush) This act will hopefully be able to help students early on, thus they will no longer need to take the remedial courses when they reach college.

Studies, released in September of this year, showed that over 50% of schools fail to meet the achievement goals set for the NCLB. Schools who fail two years in a row automatically enter Program Improvement. For the first few years, this means free tutoring, extra training for teachers, and technical help. Next, if the school still fails to meet achievement goals it will enter the reconstruction phase. When in the reconstruction phase the school reopens as a charter school. They also replace all staff and operate it by an outside agency (Asimov). These improvement programs were set up to encourage schools and students to do well on the tests and to enforce restrictions if they did not. They were also set in place to help the schools so they would be able to pass the tests the next year. If a school succeeds for two years in a row, it may exit the Program Improvement, but this rarely happens because it is very difficult to pass the tests as their difficulty continuously increases (Asimov).

Each year the standards for the NCLB will continue to increase, making it more and more difficult to pass. Eventually, in 2014, the goal is that all students will achieve academic proficiency (Cavanagh). Personally, I do not think that we, as a nation, will ever be able to reach absolute academic proficiency. I believe that we are setting our schools up for failure. Is it actually realistic to say that every single student, no matter if he or she has a learning disability, is going to obtain a perfect score or close to it, on these tests? It is impossible for every school to pass these constantly escalating regulations, as well as try to exit the improvement programs they are currently undergoing.

Depending on what you think or whom you talk to the NCLB may be a good thing, or perhaps not. Some positive things about the act are that standards are set each year and students are encouraged to succeed to meet those standards. Parents also receive an annual report showing how their children are doing on the achievement tests. The act also focuses on providing a quality education to all students, including those with disabilities or low-income families. One of the main drawbacks with the NCLB is that there is major “federal underfunding”. Also, it has very high standards required for teachers, which makes it difficult to find teachers that have enough qualifications to teach certain subjects (White). Because students who miss the testing days are unable to make it up, therefore, teachers and administrators sometimes encourage some students to miss school the day of the tests. The students that the administrators or teachers encourage to skip testing days are those who usually are currently struggling in school and whom they do not believe will do well. This is an example of another major problem with the act.

When looking at the upcoming changes in our society we look to the national election. Determining what will happen with the NCLB is dependent on what the candidates feel about it and what we as Americans want. John McCain believes that the NCLB is a good idea and is planning to uphold it (Barnes). However, McCain states that we need to focus on each child separately instead of each school as a whole. He believes that the NCLB “is only the beginning of the education reform” (“John McCain’s”). On the other side, Barack Obama is planning to restructure the law by gaining federal funding and tracking each school’s advancement (Barnes). According to his website, Obama and vice-president nominee, Joe Biden, believe “teachers should not be forced to spend the academic year preparing students to fill in bubbles on standardized tests” and he will “improve the assessments used to track student progress to measure readiness for college (“Education”).”

No Child Left Behind has started with many good thoughts in mind, but as with many things, has developed drawbacks that need to be ‘tweaked’ to better fit our nation. As McCain says, we need to look what each child needs and not what would be good for the school. McCain’s idea was not completely clear and I do not think he has decided officially at what measure he wants to take about the testing issue. It is time to focus on the students and not be worrying about whether they are going to pass a test that only deals with three main subjects. Can filling in bubbles truly tell you that the child is struggling? Since I am a bad test-taker myself, I do not feel it is fair to base a person’s knowledge on one test. There are always factors that play a role in a bad test grade such as lack of sleep, stress, being unprepared, or not being able to be fast enough if the test is timed.

When looking at each candidate’s ideas for the future, there is not a big difference. They both state that they believe the NCLB was a good start, but have ideas on how they are going to further those plans. Obama has very good ideas, such as, primarily focuses on gaining more funding for the act, because without funding the act may not continue. I also think that McCain’s plans are just as good and will be just as effective, however. I do not think I can truly say which one has the better idea, because they are so similar. I think that if they were to combine their ideas, it would be a great plan. However, since we recently learned that Barack Obama is our new president we are hoping that his ideas will be the best and he will lead our country in a positive direction.

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