

**What We Choose to Debate Matters**  
*We Can't Afford to Punt*

By Brian P. Cory

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In just over a month, our country will elect a President.

Polls indicate that the issues which are most influential and important to voters include the economy, health care, government corruption, immigration, global warming, taxes, and national security. The one issue that is the constant across all of these other issues is once again inexplicably absent from the top of the voters' list: education.

The upcoming presidential debates are unlikely to change this absence. However, if the candidates are serious about better days being ahead for the United States of America and about making progress on the above headline issues, they better start talking about education.

Unfortunately the current narrative swirling around education is focused on new core standards, teacher evaluation, school choice, unions (tenure, seniority, and collective bargaining), merit pay, STEM, and new standardized testing.

We have been down these roads before. We have seen eras of new standards come and go. Students have lumbered through batches of new standardized tests. Teacher evaluation frameworks have been published and implemented. Unions have even budged over the years.

But where are we now? In many ways, especially in looking at the conditions of our schools and the progress of our students, the answer is: *right back where we started*.

We have become terribly predictable. No matter the year, be it 1992, 2012, or 2032, voters will likely indicate that the issues important to them are the economy, health care, government corruption, immigration, global warming, taxes, and national security. Likewise, the narrative on education in 2032 is likely to be focused on new standards, teacher evaluation, school choice, unions, merit pay, STEM, and new standardized testing.

That is, unless we do something different.

We do not need to punt education to 2016 and waste another four years. We have until November 6<sup>th</sup> to find a candidate who is willing to talk about the right topics in education and who is willing to place new ideas for education on the front-burner rather than reusing the same talking points for reform.

Here are some suggested questions to vet the candidates:

- 1) Unless a miraculous sea-change emerges, my five-year-old and three-year-old sons will experience an eerily similar K-12 education as graduates of 2024 and 2026, respectively, to the one I experienced. They will eventually join the country's workforce which will need lots of skilled workers and entrepreneurs. Lee Graham on GetDegrees.com posted insights to the future workplace in a feature titled, "Top 60 Jobs That will Rock the Future." Some of the specific jobs included: bioinformatician, seed production technician, waste management consultant, computer forensics analyst, and Sarbanes-Oxley specialist. Of course our country will continue to need automobile mechanics, dentists, carpenters, computer technicians, and nutritionists. What kinds of work would your administration engage in to ensure K-12 education is a conduit to meeting these needs? For example, would you consider overhauling secondary graduation requirements? Would you encourage states to design multiple pathways to a high school diploma? Would you allow requirements and pathways to differ among districts as well as among states to meet the nation's vast array of needs?
- 2) In 2010 Education Secretary Arne Duncan said, "One-quarter of U.S. high school students drop out or fail to graduate on time. Almost one million students leave our schools for the streets each year." According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's bulletin article, "The G20 in 2050," China will become the world's largest economy in 2032 and will grow to 20% larger than the United States by 2050. The study also indicates that Brazil, China, India, Russia, and Mexico will comprise nearly 60% of G20 economic growth over the next forty years. Assuming you believe there are connections between education and the health of our economy, how exactly will standards, testing, and school choice be able to reverse the drop out data as well as to grow the economy?
- 3) Earlier this year, the Council of Foreign Relations *Independent Task Force on U.S. Education Reform and National Security* published a report that: called on governors to adopt and expand the Common Core State Standards; advocated for changes to empower students and their families to choose which schools they attend; urged the U.S. Department of Education to launch an annual national security readiness audit. As Commander-in-Chief, would you utilize these recommendations as your priorities for education? If "yes," please explain how. Feel free to share additional priorities you would hold for education.
- 4) Valerie Strauss' *The Answer Sheet* column in the *Washington Post* featured a post by Sean Slade, the director of *Healthy School Communities*. Slade offered insights to three countries which are often referenced in education reform conversations: Singapore, Finland, and Canada. He included quotes from leaders in these countries who are focused on topics such as citizen skills, play and physical education, the arts and music, individual student strengths and talents, and enlisting educators in the cause of better education.

## **SINGAPORE**

**Prime Minister Lee of Singapore (Aug. 29, 2010):**

*"I think we should do more to nurture the whole child, develop their physical robustness, enhance their creativity, shape their personal and cultural and social identity, so that they are fit, they are confident, they are imaginative and they know who they are.*

*"Every child is different, every child has his own interests, his own academic inclinations and aptitudes and our aim should be to provide him with a good education that suits him, one which enables him to achieve his potential and build on his strengths and talents. Talent means talent in many dimensions, not just academic talent but in arts, in music, in sports, in creative activities, in physical activities.*

*"We need to pay more attention to PE, to arts and music and get teachers who are qualified to teach PE and art and music.*

*"Give each one a tailored and holistic upbringing, so you get academic education, moral education, physical education, art and a sense of belonging and identity. We aim to build a mountain range with many tall peaks but with a high base, not just a single pinnacle where everybody is trying to scramble up one single peak. And we are realizing this vision."*

## **FINLAND**

**Timo Lankinen, Director-General, Finnish National Board of Education (Sept. 13, 2010):**

*"We are not actually talking a lot about numeracy or literacy, the agenda for change is more about increase of the arts and physical education into curriculum, and the highlight of 21st century skills or as we call them citizen skills.*

*"We have relatively small class sizes so there is the possibility to individualize that attention for each children (sic) ability to personalize ... but we have questions to ask ourselves, do we enable teachers and students to flourish enough, for example giving them individual aspirations, and engaging students so that there will be more experiential learning.*

*"Looking at basic education and success in PISA [Program for International Student Assessment] results, we have to bear in mind that children also participate in early childhood education ... which is mainly through play and interaction.*

*"We will be great when every student and stakeholder says for example 'I love school' and 'I'm doing well in school' – so it's not only the subject knowledge we are seeking after."*

## **CANADA**

**Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario, Canada, Sept. 13, 2010:**

*"It doesn't matter how much money you invest, it doesn't matter how much you want change -- you won't get results unless you enlist your teachers in the cause of better education."*

*"We have worked hard to build a positive, working relationship with our teachers. We do not engage in inflammatory rhetoric. We do not use our teachers as a political punching bag. Public bickering undermines public confidence."*

*"Policy development and implementation happen in dialogue with our education partners."*

*"We don't always agree, but I am reminded of some of the best political advice I ever received. I got it from my mother, on my wedding day, she said: 'Whatever happens, keep talking.'"*

*"So we keep talking to our teachers. I make it clear to them, and all our education partners, that our pursuit of improvement will be relentless. And there is no place to hide."*

As President, will you join these leaders in focusing on these topics?

- 5) The nation recently watched the teacher strike in Chicago. Assessing the results, what do you deem as the positive outcomes for students and why? If not a longer school day and longer school year, what other topics do you think could have held promise to transform Chicago schools?
- 6) Let's come up for air and have a little fun. As a parent, what time do you think the school day should start for high school?
- 7) Fun over. Besides standardized testing, what are some other forms of assessment to measure the growth of our students? In your opinion, do we currently assess what we value? How could we honor social, emotional, and behavioral growth?
- 8) Besides funding rewards and merit pay, would you support the concept of rewarding districts, schools, and educators with greater autonomy in the schooling they design and provide for their communities when they meet established targets? And if "yes," what might that look like?
- 9) There appears to be an increased federal- and state-level influence on education policy. Yet, some argue that the country is either built or broken by local communities. With local communities in mind, how could we deepen relationships between schools and their

communities in new ways? For example, could you foresee a future in which schools serve as hubs not only for curriculum but also for the delivery of primary-needs' services such as health and dental care, mental health services, family counseling, child care, and career training? If "yes," how might it be funded?

- 10) Sequestration. What would be your plan for schools?
- 11) NCLB. What would a reauthorized ESEA look like under your administration?
- 12) Higher Education. With the increased cost of tuition trends, do you have any ideas regarding alternative pathways for students to pursue to develop the skills necessary for the jobs of the future?
- 13) Investment in education is at unprecedented levels. Are these levels sustainable? Specifically, how do we provide ongoing funding to recruit, develop, and retain highly effective school leaders and educators for all schools? What role does the federal government play? What role do the states play? What role do the local stakeholders play?
- 14) Many folks still refer to the *Achievement Gap*. I'd like to get your thoughts on another gap, the *Opportunity Gap*. How would your administration close the opportunity gaps which persist in education for students? Please offer three tangible ideas.

I lose sleep thinking about the prospect of our country remaining focused on new standards, teacher evaluation, school choice, unions, merit pay, STEM, and new standardized testing in 2032. Along the same lines, I lie awake thinking of my two sons graduating in 2024 and 2026. Is there any chance that they will be ready?

We need to do something different. Better days are possible through education.

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