

Success in Education: Kerry Makes the Grade

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, October 27, 2004

With parent-teacher conferences looming, many of us are gauging how our sons and daughters are doing in class. But as we evaluate the candidates we'll be voting for or against in a few days, we need to pull back and ask, "Who will best secure the educational future for my children?"

America has twice as many shopping malls as it does high schools. How's that for priorities? Schools are more crowded than ever. One in three kids learn in a trailer or portable classroom. Class overcrowding will get worse as baby-boomers retire—historically the largest exodus of experienced teachers. The gap between wealthy and poor schools is growing. On average, high-poverty districts receive nearly \$900 less per student compared to districts with the fewest poor students, even though researchers agree it costs more to educate low-income children. And for states such as New York and Illinois, it's over \$2000 less per student.

Education isn't any better for kids about to graduate from high school. According to a study by ACT, which offers college entrance exams, only 22 percent of students are ready for college-level work in math, science, and English. ACT doesn't think we're on the right track. And while not all students choose to go to college, the tools needed to enter the work force aren't any different. It's basic life skills we're talking about.

Paying for college isn't getting easier. The College Board recently found that tuition at public universities rose 10.5 percent this year, after a 13 percent increase last year. For reference, inflation has been a fifth of that.

And beware of counting on grants. They're not keeping up with tuition increases and are even being scaled back. Instead, loans are taking over. Sadly, though, need doesn't always dictate the level of financial aid. According to the College Board, the biggest increase in the last few years has gone to the wealthiest students.

In the recent debates on domestic policy, President Bush has trumpeted No Child Left Behind as one of his major achievements. That education initiative was, however, underfunded by \$26 billion in 2004, and is still \$7 billion short of what Congress authorized for 2005. The current administration has taken a potentially good idea and made it a hindrance for school systems. Arts, language, and physical education courses are being cut as schools are forced to refocus their budgets on preparing students for the standardized tests. Many teachers and state legislators find the law meddlesome, saying it forces them to teach to a one-size-fits-all test. And it's redundant, since many states have their own assessment exams.

Despite all this, President Bush has decided to expand the initiative to three more grades and is planning for additional national tests in reading and math before high schoolers can earn a diploma. National Education Association President Reg Weaver says this about Bush's policy: "When there is an education law that doesn't work, we should hold off expanding it until we can diagnose the negative effects on children and students, parents, teachers and education support professionals."

Offering a stark contrast, Kerry is guaranteeing that new education programs authorized by Congress will be fully supported. He plans to establish a \$200 billion education trust fund, paid for by reducing Bush's tax cuts for the wealthy. Whether graduating high school students are headed for college or a job, Kerry is advocating incentives for states to align high school curricula with essential skills for college and the work force. With so many fine teachers about to retire and tuition soaring, he proposes that students who give two years of national service to the country—by working in troubled schools, for instance—get free tuition at public universities. Think AmeriCorps, an existing program to get talented youth into service opportunities in education, public safety, health, and the environment, with more participation and opportunities.

There's no quick and easy way to get education right, although there are ways to get it wrong. Misguided policy is one. Lack of attention and funding is another. We could have paid the salaries of nearly three million public school teachers for a year, or given out over seven million four-year scholarships at public universities, with the billions this administration has spent on the war in Iraq. Good education is a prerequisite to a strong future for our children and our nation. Let's not fail that test a second time.