

Final Debate Addresses Kids' Issues

During the final minutes of Wednesday night's Presidential debate, kids' issues made it into the spotlight. See the video and transcript of Barack Obama's and John McCain's statements.

For those folks who weren't able to watch the debate, or who didn't watch the very end, the candidates talked about kids' issues in the final minutes. Mirroring the theme of Every Child Matters' Homeland Insecurity report, debate moderator Bob Schieffer linked our national security to our failure to do right by our kids. Watch the videos below or read the transcript.

Clip 1: Moderator Bob Schieffer asks about education and its implications for National Security

Clip 2: Mr. Schieffer asks the candidates about the role of the federal government in Education

Transcript:

Schieffer: Let's stop there, because I want to get in a question on education and I'm afraid this is going to have to be our last question, gentlemen.

The question is this: the U.S. spends more per capita than any other country on education. Yet, by every international measurement, in math and science competence, from kindergarten through the 12th grade, we trail most of the countries of the world.

The implications of this are clearly obvious. Some even say it poses a threat to our national security.

Do you feel that way and what do you intend to do about it?

The question to Sen. Obama first.

Obama: This probably has more to do with our economic future than anything and that means it also has a national security implication, because there's never been a nation on earth that saw its economy decline and continued to maintain its primacy as a military power.

So we've got to get our education system right. Now, typically, what's happened is that there's been a debate between more money or reform, and I think we need both.

In some cases, we are going to have to invest. Early childhood education, which closes the achievement gap, so that every child is prepared for school, every dollar we invest in that, we end up getting huge benefits with improved reading scores, reduced dropout rates, reduced delinquency rates.

I think it's going to be critically important for us to recruit a generation of new teachers, an army of new teachers, especially in math and science, give them higher pay, give them more professional development and support in exchange for higher standards and accountability.

And I think it's important for us to make college affordable. Right now, I meet young people all across the country who

either have decided not to go to college or if they're going to college, they are taking on \$20,000, \$30,000, \$50,000, \$60,000 worth of debt, and it's very difficult for them to go into some fields, like basic research in science, for example, thinking to themselves that they're going to have a mortgage before they even buy a house.

And that's why I've proposed a \$4,000 tuition credit, every student, every year, in exchange for some form of community service, whether it's military service, whether it's Peace Corps, whether it's working in a community.

If we do those things, then I believe that we can create a better school system.

But there's one last ingredient that I just want to mention, and that's parents. We can't do it just in the schools. Parents are going to have to show more responsibility. They've got to turn off the TV set, put away the video games, and, finally, start instilling that thirst for knowledge that our students need.

Schieffer: Sen. McCain?

McCain: Well, it's the civil rights issue of the 21st century. There's no doubt that we have achieved equal access to schools in America after a long and difficult and terrible struggle.

But what is the advantage in a low income area of sending a child to a failed school and that being your only choice?

So choice and competition amongst schools is one of the key elements that's already been proven in places in like New Orleans and New York City and other places, where we have charter schools, where we take good teachers and we reward them and promote them.

And we find bad teachers another line of work. And we have to be able to give parents the same choice, frankly, that Sen. Obama and Mrs. Obama had and Cindy and I had to send our kids to the school -- their kids to the school of their choice.

Charter schools aren't the only answer, but they're providing competition. They are providing the kind of competitions that have upgraded both schools -- types of schools.

Now, throwing money at the problem is not the answer. You will find that some of the worst school systems in America get the most money per student.

So I believe that we need to reward these good teachers.

We need to encourage programs such as Teach for America and Troops to Teachers where people, after having served in the military, can go right to teaching and not have to take these examinations which -- or have the certification that some are required in some states.

Look, we must improve education in this country. As far as college education is concerned, we need to make those student loans available. We need to give them a repayment schedule that they can meet. We need to have full student loan program for in-state tuition. And we certainly need to adjust the certain loan eligibility to inflation.

Schieffer: Do you think the federal government should play a larger role in the schools? And I mean, more federal money?

Obama: Well, we have a tradition of local control of the schools and that's a tradition that has served us well. But I do think that it is important for the federal government to step up and help local school districts do some of the things they need to do.

Now we tried to do this under President Bush. He put forward No Child Left Behind. Unfortunately, they left the money behind for No Child Left Behind. And local school districts end up having more of a burden, a bunch of unfunded mandates, the same kind of thing that happened with special education where we did the right thing by saying every school should provide education to kids with special needs, but we never followed through on the promise of funding, and that left local school districts very cash-strapped.

So what I want to do is focus on early childhood education, providing teachers higher salaries in exchange for more support. Sen. McCain and I actually agree on two things that he just mentioned.

Charter schools, I doubled the number of charter schools in Illinois despite some reservations from teachers unions. I think it's important to foster competition inside the public schools.

And we also agree on the need for making sure that if we have bad teachers that they are swiftly -- after given an opportunity to prove themselves, if they can't hack it, then we need to move on because our kids have to have their best future.

Where we disagree is on the idea that we can somehow give out vouchers -- give vouchers as a way of securing the problems in our education system. And I also have to disagree on Sen. McCain's record when it comes to college accessibility and affordability.

Recently his key economic adviser was asked about why he didn't seem to have some specific programs to help young people go to college and the response was, well, you know, we can't give money to every interest group that comes along.

I don't think America's youth are interest groups, I think they're our future. And this is an example of where we are going to have to prioritize. We can't say we're going to do things and then not explain in concrete terms how we're going to pay for it.

And if we're going to do some of the things you mentioned, like lowering loan rates or what have you, somebody has got to pay for it. It's not going to happen on its own.

Schieffer: What about that, Senator?

McCain: Well, sure. I'm sure you're aware, Sen. Obama, of the program in the Washington, D.C., school system where vouchers are provided and there's a certain number, I think it's a thousand and some and some 9,000 parents asked to be eligible for that.

Because they wanted to have the same choice that you and I and Cindy and your wife have had. And that is because they wanted to choose the school that they thought was best for their children.

And we all know the state of the Washington, D.C., school system. That was vouchers. That was voucher, Sen. Obama. And I'm frankly surprised you didn't pay more attention to that example.

Now as far as the No Child Left Behind is concerned, it was a great first beginning in my view. It had its flaws, it had its problems, the first time we had looked at the issue of education in America from a nationwide perspective. And we need to fix a lot of the problems. We need to sit down and reauthorize it.

But, again, spending more money isn't always the answer. I think the Head Start program is a great program. A lot of people, including me, said, look, it's not doing what it should do. By the third grade many times children who were in the Head Start program aren't any better off than the others.

Let's reform it. Let's reform it and fund it. That was, of course, out-of-bounds by the Democrats. We need to reform these programs. We need to have transparency. We need to have rewards. It's a system that cries out for accountability and transparency and the adequate funding.

And I just said to you earlier, town hall meeting after town hall meeting, parents come with kids, children -- precious children who have autism. Sarah Palin knows about that better than most. And we'll find and we'll spend the money, research, to find the cause of autism. And we'll care for these young children. And all Americans will open their wallets and their hearts to do so.

But to have a situation, as you mentioned in our earlier comments, that the most expensive education in the world is in the United States of America also means that it cries out for reform, as well.

And I will support those reforms, and I will fund the ones that are reformed. But I'm not going to continue to throw money at a problem. And I've got to tell you that vouchers, where they are requested and where they are agreed to, are a good and workable system. And it's been proven.

Obama: I'll just make a quick comment about vouchers in D.C. Sen. McCain's absolutely right: The D.C. school system is in terrible shape, and it has been for a very long time. And we've got a wonderful new superintendent there who's working very hard with the young mayor there to try...

McCain: Who supports vouchers.

Obama: ... who initiated -- actually, supports charters.

McCain: She supports vouchers, also.

Obama: But the -- but here's the thing, is that, even if Sen. McCain were to say that vouchers were the way to go -- I disagree with him on this, because the data doesn't show that it actually solves the problem -- the centerpiece of Sen. McCain's education policy is to increase the voucher program in D.C. by 2,000 slots.

That leaves all of you who live in the other 50 states without an education reform policy from Sen. McCain.

So if we are going to be serious about this issue, we've got to have a president who is going to tackle it head-on. And that's what I intend to do as president.

Schieffer: All right.

McCain: Because there's not enough vouchers; therefore, we shouldn't do it, even though it's working. I got it.

Schieffer: All right.

Gentlemen, we have come to the close. Before I ask both of you for your closing statements tonight, I'd like to invite our viewers and listeners to go to MyDebates.org, where you will find this evening's debates and the three that preceded tonight's debate.

Now, for the final statements, by a coin toss, Senator McCain goes first.

»[Read Full Transcript](#)