

The Party Platforms

by {ga=pfarber}

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If you are an American child on January 20th, 2001 when the next president of the United States is sworn in, what can you expect the new government to do on your behalf?

The answer, based on the two platforms unveiled this month at the Republican and Democratic conventions:

If Republicans are elected, according to the Republican National Committee platform, expect computers in your classroom and your library to be secured against pornography. Your school will enact a zero-tolerance policy toward disruptive kids, and will reinstate voluntary school prayer. You will be protected from offensive and intrusive questionnaires. When you go to sex ed, you will be protected from talk about sex; you will be offered lessons on abstinence instead. Do not expect any new supplies, library books or building improvements if the Republican platform prevails.

If the Democrats get in, you can look forward to a reading exam in fourth grade and a math exam in eighth grade to check your progress. Not to worry: your teachers will also be taking a new test. They'll have to pass a "rigorous and fair" exam before stepping foot in your classroom. If you're a four-year-old, you may be one of the lucky ones to benefit from new federal funding for preschools, and if you're an elementary school student, you may find yourself in one of the reduced class-size schoolrooms funded with federal money. Whatever your age, if the Democrat's platform prevails, your folks will be entitled to take family leave from work to go to parent-teacher conferences.

The GOP planks on education, it should be noted, have just about nothing in common with proposals coming out of Bush headquarters. Governor George W. Bush's proposals focus attention on the achievement gap between black and white students, a topic that is never mentioned in the GOP platform (or the Democratic platform, for that matter). You can see the

[Republican platform](#)

and the

[Bush proposals](#)

on-line. The

[Democratic platform](#)

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will go on-line later this month.

Standardized tests are going to dominate your school days from now on, no matter who wins. Both Democrats and Republicans will use federal money to reward states that improve test scores and punish those that don't. Bush is more explicit than Vice President Al Gore in tying the sanctions to closing the gap between minority and white students' scores. If Bush is elected and your state fails to reduce the gap, he'll transfer money that would have gone to state bureaucrats directly to your folks. If Gore wins, he'll punish state bureaucrats by giving the money directly to schools.

It will come as no surprise that both parties want parents to create stable, prosperous homes. The Republicans will give parents, no matter what their income, a new \$500-a-year child tax credit. The Democrats will raise the minimum wage and increase the amount of money parents can earn and still be eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit.

The Republicans say they will toughen the juvenile justice system, even though there are now twice as many children serving time in adult prisons than a decade ago and every state has passed laws making it possible to try youngsters in adult courts. The Democrats are mostly silent on juvenile crime except to call for expanded drug-treatment programs for kids.

Twelve million kids -- one in six -- do not have health insurance. Both parties tried to fix this with the creation in 1997 of CHIP, the Child Health Insurance Program, which covers children from families with too much income for Medicaid and not enough for private insurance. The bottleneck seems to be at state capitals, where legislatures have been slow to draft state versions and welfare officials have been wrongfully steering working families away from benefits. The platforms of both the Democrats and Republicans pledge to do more to get children signed up.

Whether they will do what they promise is a different lesson.

Peggy J. Farber is freelance journalist specializing in children's issues. Her reporting on conditions of NYC children has appeared in City Limits Magazine as well as on National Public Radio.

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