THE WAR of words in this political contest has produced few battles over education. The problem is not that the campaigns have ignored education. The disappointment is that little of what either candidate promises represents change. Candidates talked about the need for a "world-class education system," education as the ticket to a good future, nit-picking changes to the No Child Left Behind Act, changes to teacher compensation, more choice, and less government interference.

But what the candidates have not said is more important.

First, other than Republican calls to eliminate the Department of Education, the campaigns have not addressed the need to reassess the roles of each level of governance in education policy making. Frankly, the relationships have become messy and ineffective. Those who want equitable opportunities for students rely on federal mandates and policies because the closer decisions get to the school level, the less equitable they become. This leads to an imbalance in access to high-quality teaching in low-income schools. However, NCLB and congressional categorical programs have dumped an enormous number of decisions on the federal level.

In the party platforms, almost every recommendation to improve education is, basically, a state or local responsibility. Higher standards, better accountability, new teacher compensation plans, greater choice for parents — all of these are the work of state policy makers, not federal officials. The feds and Congress can help most by providing incentives, setting priorities, backing up policies with sound research, and disseminating that research effectively. On this last point, federal officials have never found how to get state policy makers or educators to use research.

Providing high-quality early childhood education is almost a given in the campaign recommendations, but practically every state governor and legislature already is on board for this one. Federal policy makers should focus on expanding Head Start so that it reaches every eligible child.

None of the rhetoric addresses the need to build the capacity of states to carry out the enormous reform agenda imposed by the federal level. Surveys show that most state officials feel inadequate to carry out the NCLB mandates, but no one seems to want to do something about this problem.

The disconnect between federal policy and improving student outcomes is very clear in a summary by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education of 15 years of research on the use of financial resources at the school level. The summary focuses on how schools spend education dollars and how those dollars could be reallocated to improve student achievement.1

Spending on teacher professional development illustrates the unfortunate choice of ineffective investments. NCLB provides vast resources for professional development, yet the summary cites a study of professional development in several large cities that were spending $4,000 to $8,000 per teacher but chose strategies that "were generally a mile wide and an inch deep, having little impact on teachers’ instructional practice.”

The researchers explored why some schools dramatically improve student performance while staying within the national average expenditure per pupil. The findings are not a surprise. The schools set high goals for all students, analyzed and used student data in sophisticated ways, threw out the old curriculum and replaced it with a more rigorous and research-based one, put instructional coaches in all schools, used many sources of funding to help struggling students, used time more effectively, and created professional communities. We need to take these findings and see how they can be used to revise NCLB so that it supports real change in classrooms.

During the midst of the campaign, two education policy camps seemed to emerge, one calling for investments in the nonschool supports needed by poor students and the other saying that accountability is fundamental. Truthfully, neither policy area can be neglected. Those supports (e.g., access to health, recreation, family economic stability) must be there, but accountability (certainly better ones for students and schools) also must be in place.

More critical, accountability should extend to the
broader community. If the nonschool supports are to be effective, the federal government ought to redraw lines of collaboration across programs and cabinet levels. Economic researchers ought to be sitting at the policy table in the Department of Education, and informed educators ought to be working with the Department of Labor. And all of them, at all levels of governance, should be held accountable for the learning outcomes of children.

Both parties also talk about improving workforce training, but without much imagination. Where is the promise of finally having a real school-to-work transition system such as those used successfully by many countries in Europe and Asia? Everyone wants students to use technology well, but where are the possibilities of using it to reform teacher education?

There are pieces of this kind of policy. A regional-based effort to improve coordination among federal agencies is on the books but has never been given much attention by the Bush Administration. Congress just authorized a new center for research on technologies, but we don’t know if it will be innovative. Many community colleges have implemented career pathways programs that reach into high schools, but they are not part of any overall policy that integrates efforts into a school-to-work transition system.

Finally, the names I have heard as potential candidates for Secretary of Education hardly produce an image of innovation. In the more than a quarter century of having a department, its leaders have been bureaucrats, lawyers, governors, intellectuals, school administrators, and political operatives. Why not appoint someone who can inspire kids and families to respect what education can do for them? Leave the details of policy making to informed deputies and assistants. Have a leader who really can change our ideas about education.
