By Denis Doyle

For personal reasons, Louis Armstrong’s sung refrain of “once more once” in his famous rendition of *Mack the Knife* comes to mind this election cycle. Just as Armstrong called for another rendition, this is the seventh time *Kappan* has asked me to solicit education essays from the two presidential candidates. That’s 28 years! *Tempus fugit!* How time flies and how issues repeat themselves. But there are also differences, and in this election cycle education is treated not with a bang, but a whimper. While education as a national issue continues to command the public’s interest, it is just barely on the candidates’ radar.

I speak from experience.

In March, on behalf of *Kappan*, I invited the three leading presidential contenders — Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Barack Obama — to submit essays about their educational platforms. The promise of reaching 50,000 readers — the nation’s education elite — is no small matter, one that elicited a strong response the first six times around.

This time, nothing from the two candidates still left standing by convention time.

Much personal badgering ensued and finally one of the campaigns — Obama’s — submitted the speech that appears in this issue. Unhappily, McCain’s campaign did not submit an essay, and what runs here is a pastiche taken from the candidate’s web site.

The necessity to revert to Plan B raises questions I perforce must ask: Is this emblematic of the low regard in which the campaigns hold the issue? Is it attributable to campaign fatigue? Is education once again off the national table? Is the web and its progeny (whatever they may be) simply going to shoulder aside print journalism? Is it all of the above?

Nobody has answers

Because the candidates and their advisors cannot possibly think education is unimportant in the 21st century, there must be another possibility. I suggest this explanation: No one is sure what to do at the national level, least of all John McCain.

In part, the reason is not hard to fathom. The tools available to Uncle Sam are either too blunt or too controversial to effect the changes that education needs, and interest groups are more easily mollified with silence than detailed position statements. Silence is golden (or ignorance is bliss, if you prefer). Not surprisingly, candidates are reluctant to touch what looks
more and more like a third rail. Federal programs are viewed as too crude to reach the classroom when nuance is essential or too controversial (e.g., national standards, national tests) to raise in a campaign.

There were reasons George Bush was able to turn 100 years of Republican antipathy to a strong federal role in education on its head — and leaving teacher unions, which had resolutely supported a vigorous national role, to lament the form this federal role eventually assumed. In this connection, remember that Bush took on education because of his experience in Texas — where the issue played well — and because his polling showed that education was an issue that would actually move voters, especially soccer moms, in campaign 2000.

Indeed, not so long ago, Jimmy Carter made a campaign promise to create a cabinet-level department of education, a proposal greeted by hosannas from the education establishment and expressions of gloom from the right.

Four years later, Ronald Reagan ran on an education promise of his own: eliminate the Department of Education. But even with his overwhelming win, he couldn’t find a member of Congress to carry the legislation. Such are the vicissitudes of Washington.

Fast forward 20 years to 2000 and the roles reversed, with Gov. George Bush in favor of a federal role and Democrats uncertain about what Uncle Sam should do. By 2004, what did the essays reveal? Most important, a sea change had occurred in the federal role in education. In the pre-election October 2000 Kappan, I wrote that historically what had separated Republicans from Democrats was the “same.” Democrats wanted more of the “same” — more money, more teachers, more supplies, and the like — while Republicans wanted less of the “same” — “money doesn’t make a difference.” By 2000, “money doesn’t make a difference” had become a conservative mantra.

Indeed, even the middle ground was much the “same,” exemplified by Minnesota State Senator and education reformer John Brandl, who observed that he would support “more dollars for education if there was more education for the dollar,” a sentiment that neatly split the difference.

Whatever the candidates’ politics, the debate unfolded in the context of a shared vision about the general contours of schooling. To only slightly oversimplify, most Americans thought school was a building that housed workers called teachers who filled their charges with knowledge and skills. Some schools were good, others not so good. Some schools had more abundant resources — more money, better trained teachers, more advantaged students — and others had less, in each or all categories.

At one level, then, it is no wonder the campaign of 2008 has generated so little discussion about education on either side of the aisle. Today, both sides simultaneously support more of the “same” and less of the “same.” While there is widespread agreement that the existing education format should be changed, even changed profoundly, there is no consensus, on either side of the aisle, about what should be done.

That something will be done in the next four years is a foregone conclusion. What is done, however, at least in 2009, is likely to depend more on what happens at the congressional end of Pennsylvania Avenue than on who occupies the White House.

Confusion exists on both sides of the aisle about what should be done. Each side simultaneously supports more of the “same” and less of the “same.”
I don’t want to send another generation of American children to failing schools. I don’t want that future for my daughters. I don’t want that future for your sons. I do not want that future for America.

— Barack Obama, Nov. 10, 2007

Editor’s note: In lieu of submitting an essay written especially for the Kappan audience, the Barack Obama campaign submitted a speech that Sen. Obama delivered in Thornton, Colo., in May 2008 summarizing his education beliefs and proposals.

In a world where good jobs can be located anywhere there’s an Internet connection; where a child in Denver is competing with children in Beijing and Bangalore, the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge. Education is the currency of the Information Age — no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success, but a prerequisite. There simply aren’t as many jobs today that can support a family where only a high school degree is required. And if you don’t have that degree, there are even fewer jobs available that can keep you out of poverty.

In this kind of economy, countries who out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow. Already, China is graduating eight times as many engineers as we are. By 12th grade, our children score lower on math and science tests than most other kids in the world. And we now have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation in the world. In fact, if the more than 16,000 Colorado students who dropped out of high school last year had only finished, the economy in this state would have seen an additional $4.1 billion in wages over these students’ lifetimes.

There is still much progress to be made here in Thornton, but the work you’ve done shows us that we do not accept this future for America.

We don’t have to accept an America where we do nothing about 6 million students who are reading below their grade level.

We don’t have to accept an America where only 20% of our students are prepared to take college-level classes in English, math, and science — where barely one in 10 low-income students will ever graduate from college.

We don’t have to accept an America where we do nothing about the fact that half of all teenagers are unable to understand basic fractions — where nearly nine in 10 African-American and Latino 8th graders are not proficient in math. We don’t have to accept an America where elementary school kids are only getting an average of 25 minutes of science each day when we know that over 80% of the fastest-growing jobs require a knowledge base in math and science.

This kind of America is morally unacceptable for (Continued on page 92)
opportunities so children enter kindergarten ready to learn. Create Early Learning Challenge Grants to stimulate and help fund states’ “zero to five” efforts. Encourage all states to adopt voluntary universal pre-school.

Expand Early Head Start by quadrupling the number of eligible infants and toddlers. Increase Head Start funding and improve quality for both Early Head Start and traditional Head Start. Expand the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and adequately fund the Child Care Development Block Grant Program.

Create a Presidential Early Learning Council to increase collaboration and program coordination across federal, state, and local levels.

Recruit and retain well-qualified teachers especially for high-poverty, high-minority areas.

Create Teaching Service Scholarships that cover training costs in high-quality teacher preparation or alternative certification programs at the undergraduate or graduate level for those who are willing to teach in a high-need field or location for at least four years. Create Teaching Residency Programs to prepare teachers to work in high-need districts. Provide $1 billion in grants to create mentoring programs and reward veteran teachers for becoming mentors. Provide incentives for redesigning schools organized for teacher learning, and provide paid common planning and professional learning time.

Provide funding to create or enhance state leadership academies to grow and support principals.

Create a $200 million grant program for states and districts that want to provide additional learning time for students in need.

Reduce the high school dropout rate by improving middle school achievement. Establish a competitive grant process to support existing or proposed public/private partnerships or entities pursuing new ideas to support existing programs or organizations that can help achieve this goal.

Barack Obama (continued) our children. It’s economically untenable for our future. And it’s not who we are as a nation.

We are the nation that has always understood that our future is inextricably linked to the education of our children — all of them. We are the country that has always believed in Thomas Jefferson’s declaration that “... talent and virtue, needed in a free society, should be educated regardless of wealth or birth.”

We are the nation that has always understood that our future is inextricably linked to the education of our children — all of them.

That’s who we are. And that’s why I believe it’s time to lead a new era of mutual responsibility in education — one where we all come together for the sake of our children’s success; an era where each of us does our part to make that success a reality — parents and teachers; leaders in Washington and citizens all across America.

**FIX NCLB**

This starts with fixing the broken promises of No Child Left Behind. Now, I believe that the goals of this law were the right ones. Making a promise to educate every child with an excellent teacher is right. Closing the achievement gap that exists in too many cities and rural areas is right. More accountability is right. Higher standards are right.

But I’ll tell you what’s wrong with No Child Left Behind. Forcing our teachers, our principals, and our schools to accomplish all of this without the resources they need is wrong. Promising high-quality teachers in every classroom and then leaving the support and the pay for those teachers behind is wrong. Labeling a school and its students as failures one day and then throwing your hands up and walking away from them the next is wrong.

We must fix the failures of No Child Left Behind. We must provide the funding we were promised, give our states the resources they need, and finally meet our commitment to special education. We also need to realize that we can meet high standards without forcing teachers and students to spend most of the year preparing for a single, high-stakes test. Recently, 87% of Colorado teachers said that testing was crowding out subjects like music and art. . . .

As President, I will work with our nation’s governors and educators to create and use assessments that can improve achievement all across America by including the kinds of research, scientific investigation, and problem solving that our children will need to compete in a 21st century knowledge economy. The tests our children take should support learning, not just accounting. If we really want our children to become the great inventors and problem solvers of tomorrow, our schools shouldn’t stifle innovation, they should let it thrive. . . .

But fixing the problems of No Child Left Behind is not an education policy on its own. It’s just a starting point.

**NEW RESOURCES AND NEW REFORMS**

A truly historic commitment to education — a real commitment — will require new resources and new reforms. It will require a willingness to move beyond the stale debates that have paralyzed Washington for decades — Democrat versus Republican; vouchers versus the status quo; more money versus more accountability. It will require leaders in Washington (Continued on page 94)
Barack Obama (continued) who are willing to learn a lesson from students and teachers . . . about what actually works. That’s the kind of President I intend to be, and that’s the kind of education plan I’ve proposed in this campaign.

It begins with the understanding that from the moment our children step into a classroom, the single most important factor in determining their achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from; it’s not who their parents are or how much money they have.

It’s who their teacher is. It’s the person who stays past the last bell and spends their own money on books and supplies. It’s the men and women . . . who go beyond the call of duty because you believe that’s what makes the extra difference. And it does.

If we know how much teaching matters, then it’s time we treated teaching like the profession it is.

And if we know how much teaching matters, then it’s time we treated teaching like the profession it is. I don’t want to just talk about how great teachers are — I want to be a President who rewards them for their greatness.

That starts with recruiting a new generation of teachers and principals to replace the generation that’s retiring and those who are leaving . . . [A]s President, I’ll create a new Service Scholarship program to recruit top talent into the profession, and begin by placing these new teachers in overcrowded districts and struggling rural towns, or hard-to-staff subjects like math and science in schools all across the nation. And I will make this pledge as President to all who sign up — if you commit your life to teaching, America will commit to paying for your college education.

To prepare our teachers, I will create more Teacher Residency Programs to train 30,000 high-quality teachers a year. We know these programs work, and they especially help attract talented individuals who decide to become teachers midway through their careers . . . .

To support our teachers, we will expand mentoring programs that pair experienced, successful teachers with new recruits — one of the most effective ways to retain teachers. We’ll also make sure that teachers work in conditions which help them and our children succeed . . . .

And when our teachers do succeed in making a real difference in our children’s lives, I believe it’s time we rewarded them for it. I realize that the teachers in Denver are in the middle of tough negotiations right now, but what they’ve already proven is that it’s possible to find new ways to increase teacher pay that are developed with teachers, not imposed on them.

My plan would provide resources to try these innovative programs in school districts all across America. Under my Career Ladder Initiative, these districts will be able to design programs that reward accomplished educators who serve as mentors to new teachers with the salary increase they deserve. They can reward those who teach in underserved areas, or teachers who take on added responsibilities . . . . And if teachers acquire additional knowledge and skills to serve students better — if they consistently excel in the classroom — that work can be valued and rewarded as well.

MAKE COLLEGE AFFORDABLE

And when our children do succeed . . . we need to make sure that every single student can afford to go (to college). As President, I will offer a $4,000 tax credit that will cover two-thirds of the tuition at an average public college and make community college completely free. And in re- (Continued on page 96)
A truly historic commitment to education — a real commitment — will require new resources and new reforms.
— Barack Obama, May 2008

Barack Obama (continued) turn, I will ask students to serve their country, whether it’s by teaching or volunteering or joining the Peace Corps. We’ll also simplify the maze of paperwork required to apply for financial aid, and make it as easy as checking off a box on your tax returns — because you shouldn’t need a Ph.D. to apply for a student loan.

Finally, as so many of you know, there are too many children in America right now who are slipping away from us as we speak — who will not be accepted to college and won’t even graduate high school. They are overwhelmingly black, and Latino, and poor. And when they look around and see that no one has lifted a finger to fix their school since the 19th century, when they are pushed out the door at the sound of the last bell — some into a virtual war zone — is it any wonder they don’t think their education is important? Is it any wonder that they are dropping out in rates we’ve never seen before?

I know these children. I know their sense of hopelessness. I began my career over two decades ago as a community organizer on the streets of Chicago’s South Side. And I worked with parents and teachers and local leaders to fight for their future. We set up after-school programs and we even protested outside government offices so that we could get those who had dropped out into alternative schools. And in time, we changed futures.

And so while I know hopelessness, I also know hope. I know that if we bring early education programs to these communities; if we stop waiting until high school to address the dropout rate and start in earlier grades, as my Success in the Middle Act will do; if we bring in new, qualified teachers; if we expand college outreach programs like GEAR UP and TRIO and fight to expand summer learning opportunities for minority and disadvantaged students, like I’ve done in the Senate; or if we double funding for after-school programs to serve a million more children, as I’ve proposed to do as president, if we do all this, we can make a difference in the lives of our children and the life of this country. I know we can. I’ve seen it happen. And so have you.

Yes, it takes new resources, but we also know that there is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child’s education from day one. There is no substitute for a parent who will make sure their children are in school on time, and help them with their homework after dinner, and attend those parent-teacher conferences. . . . And I have no doubt that we will still be talking about these problems in the next century if we do not have parents who are willing to turn off the TV once in a while, and put away the video games, and read to their child. Responsibility for our children’s education has to start at home. We have to set high standards for them, and spend time with them, and love them. We have to hold ourselves accountable.

This is the commitment we must make to our children. This is the chance they must have. And I will never forget that the only reason I’m standing here today is because I was given that same chance. And so was my wife.

Our parents weren’t wealthy by any means. My mother raised my sister and me on her own, and she even had to use food stamps at one point. Michelle’s father was a worker at a water filtration plant on the South Side of Chicago and provided for his family on a single salary. And yet, with the help of scholarships and student loans and a little luck, Michelle and I both had the chance to receive a world-class education. And my sister ended up becoming a teacher herself.

That is the promise of education in America — that no matter what we look like or where we come from or who our parents are, each of us should have the opportunity to fulfill our God-given potential. Each of us should have the chance to achieve the American Dream.
John McCain

After decades of hearing the same big promises from the public education establishment, and seeing the same poor results, it is surely time to shake off old ways and to demand new reforms.

— John McCain, July 16, 2008

Editor’s note: In March, the John McCain campaign was invited to provide an essay of no more than 2,500 words describing the candidate’s position on education. The campaign had not submitted an essay by Kappan’s deadline. The following material is drawn from speeches posted on the McCain campaign’s official web site, www.johnmccain.com.

If the campaign provides Kappan with a statement about its position, that statement will be posted on the web site at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm.

McCain’s speech to LaRaza convention, July 14

In the global economy, what you learn is what you earn... We need to shake up failed school bureaucracies with competition; hold schools accountable for results; strengthen math, science, technology and engineering curriculums; empower parents with choice; remove barriers to qualified instructors, attract and reward superior teachers, and have a fair but sure process to weed out incompetents. I’m a strong believer in charter schools... You understand the importance of early childhood development and the active role parents must play in their children’s education to make sure they graduate on time and with an excellent opportunity to live happy and prosperous lives. You deserve a greater say in deciding how your children are educated, and I am committed to making sure you do.

McCain’s speech to the NAACP, July 16

As our country has changed these past few decades, so have many of your debates within the NAACP, and within other civil rights organizations. In the days of separate lunch counters, bullhorns, and fire hoses, the mission was hard and dangerous, but it was easily defined. The advancement of African Americans meant equal protection under law, in a country where the law had simply codified injustice. That cause required the enormous courage and commitment of generations, and a determination to hold this nation to its own creed.

You know better than I do how different the challenges are today for those who champion the cause of equal opportunity in America. Equal access to public education has been gained. But what is the value of access to a failing school? Equal employment opportunity is set firmly down in law. But with jobs becoming scarcer — and 400,000 Americans thrown out of work (Continued on page 93)
Many thousands of highly qualified men and women that opportunity. As in other challenges African Americans have met and overcome, these problems require clarity of purpose. They require the solidarity of groups like the NAACP. And, at times, they also require a willingness to break from conventional thinking.

Nowhere are the limitations of conventional thinking any more apparent than in education policy. Education reform has long been a priority of the NAACP, and for good reason. For all the best efforts of teachers and administrators, the worst problems of our public school system are often found in black communities. Black and Latino students are among the most likely to drop out of high school. African Americans are also among the least likely to go on to college.

After decades of hearing the same big promises from the public education establishment, and seeing the same poor results, it is surely time to shake off old ways and to demand new reforms. That isn’t just my opinion; it is the conviction of parents in poor neighborhoods across this nation who want better lives for their children. In Washington, D.C., the Opportunity Scholarship Program serves more than 1,900 boys and girls from families with an average income of $23,000 a year. And more than 7,000 more families have applied for that program. What they all have in common is the desire to get their kids into a better school.

Democrats in Congress, including my opponent, oppose the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. In remarks to the American Federation of Teachers last weekend, Senator Obama dismissed public support for private school vouchers for low-income Americans as “tired rhetoric about vouchers and school choice.” All of that went over well with the teachers union, but where does it leave families and their children who are stuck in failing schools?

Over the years, Americans have heard a lot of ‘tired rhetoric’ about education. We’ve heard it in the endless excuses of people who seem more concerned about their own position than about our children. We’ve heard it from politicians who accept the status quo rather than stand up for real change in our public schools. Parents ask only for schools that are safe, teachers who are competent, and diplomas that open doors of opportunity. When a public system fails, repeatedly, to meet these minimal objectives, parents ask only for a choice in the education of their children. Some parents may choose a better public school. Some may choose a private school. Many will choose a charter school. No entrenched bureaucracy or union should deny parents that choice and children that opportunity.

We should also offer more choices to those who wish to become teachers. Many thousands of highly qualified men and women... (Continued on page 95)
John McCain (continued) have great knowledge, wisdom, and experience to offer public school students. But a monopoly on teacher certification prevents them from getting that chance. You can be a Nobel Laureate and not qualify to teach in most public schools today. They don’t have all the proper credits in educational ‘theory’ or ‘methodology’ — all they have is learning and the desire and ability to share it. If we’re putting the interests of students first, then those qualifications should be enough.

If I am elected president, school choice for all who want it, an expansion of Opportunity Scholarships, and alternative certification for teachers will all be part of a serious agenda of education reform. I will target funding to recruit teachers who graduate in the top 25% of their class, or who participate in an alternative teacher recruitment program such as Teach for America, the American Board for Teacher Excellence, and the New Teacher Project.

We will pay bonuses to teachers who take on the challenge of working in our most troubled schools — because we need their fine minds and good hearts to help turn those schools around. We will award bonuses as well to our highest-achieving teachers. And no longer will we measure teacher achievement by conformity to process. We will measure it by the success of their students.

Moreover, the funds for these bonuses will not be controlled by faraway officials — in Washington, in a state capital, or even in a district office. Under my reforms, we will entrust both the funds and the responsibilities where they belong, in the office of the school principal. One reason that charter schools are so successful, and so sought-after by parents, is that principals have spending discretion. And I intend to give that same discretion to public school principals. No longer will money be spent in service to rigid and often meaningless formulas. Relying on the good judgment and firsthand knowledge of school principals, education money will be spent in service to public school students.

We can also help more children and young adults to study outside of school by expanding support for virtual learning. So I propose to direct $500 million in current federal funds to build new virtual schools, and to support the development of online courses for students. Through competitive grants, we will allocate another $250 million to support state programs expanding online education opportunities, including the creation of new public virtual charter schools. States can use these funds to build virtual math and science academies to help expand the availability of Advanced Placement math, science, and computer science courses, online tutoring, and foreign language courses.

Under my reforms, moreover, parents will exercise freedom of choice in obtaining extra help for children who are falling behind. As it is, federal aid to parents for tutoring for their children has to go through another bureaucracy. They can’t purchase the tutoring directly, without having to deal with the same education establishment that failed their children in the first place. These needless restrictions will be removed, under my reforms. If a student needs extra help, parents will be able to sign them up to get it, with direct public support.

McCain, speech at the Greater Columbus (Ohio) Convention Center, May 15

Public education in the United States is much improved thanks to the competition provided by charter and private schools; the increase of quality teachers through incentives like merit pay and terrific programs that attract to the classroom enthusiastic and innovative teachers from many disciplines, like Teach for America and Troops to Teachers. Educational software and online teaching programs endorsed by qualified nonprofits (Continued on page 97)
Nowhere are the limitations of conventional thinking any more apparent than in education policy.

— John McCain, July 2008

John McCain (continued) are much more widely in use, bringing to the smallest classrooms in America some of the greatest math, English, and science teachers in the country. This revolution in teaching methods has especially benefited rural America. Test scores and graduation rates are rising everywhere in the country.

McCain speech at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia, April 1

Every child should be blessed with a teacher like I had, and to learn at institutions with high academic standards and codes of conduct that reinforce the values their parents try to impart to them. Many students do have that opportunity. But too many do not. And government should be concerned with their fate. I supported the No Child Left Behind Act because it recognizes that we can no longer accept high standards for some students and low standards for others. With honest reporting of student progress we begin to see what is happening to students who were previously invisible to us. That is progress on its own, but we can and we must do better.

If a failing school won’t change, it shouldn’t be beyond the reach of students to change their schools. Parents should be able to send their children to the school that best suits their needs just as Cindy and I have been able to do, whether it is a public, private, or parochial school. The result will not be the demise of the public school system in America, but competition that will help make public schools accountable and as successful as they should be in a country as great and prosperous as ours. Teaching is among the most honorable professions any American can join. After our parents, few people influence our early life as profoundly as teachers. Theirs is an underpaid profession, dedicated to the service of others, which offers little in the way of the rewards that much of popular culture encourages us to crave — wealth and celebrity. But though it might lack much in the way of creature comforts and renown, teaching offers a reward far more valuable: the profound satisfaction that comes from knowing you have made a difference for the better in someone else’s life. Good teachers occupy a place in our memory that accords them a reverence we give few others. We should be wise enough to understand that those who work diligently and lovingly to educate the children we entrust to their care, deserve the gratitude and support many of us wish we had given those of our own teachers, who once made such a difference in our own lives.

We should reward the best of them with merit pay, and encourage teachers who have lost their focus on the children they teach to find another line of work. Schools should compete to be innovative, flexible, and student-centered institutions, not safe havens for the uninspired and unaccountable. They should be able to compete for dedicated, effective, character-building teachers, hire them and reward them. I believe we should encourage military veterans to enter the teaching profession, and I’ve advocated the Troops to Teachers Act. The sense of heightened responsibility and duty to a cause greater than themselves that veterans were taught in the discipline and code of conduct of the armed forces make many of them excellent candidates to impart those virtues to our children, and help them see the value of learning as a means to self-improvement and much nobler ends. There is no reason on earth that this great country should not possess the best education system in the world. We have let fear of uncertainty and a view that education’s primary purpose is to protect jobs for teachers and administrators degrade our sense of the possible in America. There is no excuse for it.