

Campaigns offer similar education plans

Carol Zimmermann/CNS

WASHINGTON — Amid the election-year rhetoric on the economy, foreign affairs, domestic policies and taxes, education does not often grab headlines.

In fact, the educational proposals of the presidential campaigns do not offer much contrast with each other. Both Democrats and Republicans are stressing the need for schools to provide more fundamental skills, close learning gaps and improve graduation rates, and for colleges to be made more affordable.

And even though much of the educational talk has little to do with private schools, Catholic-school officials are paying attention to what politicians are saying and not saying.

On the campaign trail as the Re-

publican candidate, President Bush, speaks highly of the No Child Left Behind legislation, an educational centerpiece of his administration that aims to reform public schools by calling for statewide reading and math tests each year to identify failing schools.

The Democratic candidate, Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts, who voted for the education bill, has criticized Bush for not backing the legislation with enough funding.

Oblate Father William Davis, assistant secretary for Catholic schools and public policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Education, said federal education officials have been open to consultation with religious leaders, particularly in making sure that private schools were included in No

Child Left Behind. The legislation gives private schools access to more programs.

The legislative package failed to mention that vouchers, a favored school-reform option among many Catholic school leaders, were endorsed in the U.S. bishops' 2003 document, "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility," which said parents "have a fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children, including private and religious schools."

Bush, who has spoken in favor of vouchers, backed the newly legislated voucher plan for 1,700 low-income children in the District of Columbia and also requested funding for a federal Choice Incentive Fund, which would allow low-income par-

ents of students attending low-performing schools, to transfer their children to better public, charter or private schools.

He has also shown support for educational tax credits, where individuals and corporations can donate funds to be used for school tuition or other educational expenses.

Kerry does not support vouchers or education tax credits.

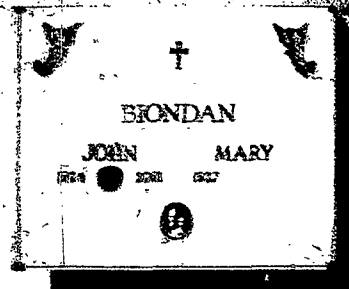
In the Senate, Kerry has voted against tax-free savings accounts of up to \$2,000 per child annually to be used for tuition or other educational expenses.

Both Bush and Kerry are promising to do more to recruit, train and support teachers, an issue that is also a concern to Catholic-school officials amid a nationwide teacher shortage.

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