

# Catch up: Four takeaways from the Democratic presidential forum on education

By *Matt Barnum, Sarah Darville* July 5, 2019



*Senator Elizabeth Warren and NEA President Lily Eskelsen García at the NEA's Strong Public Schools 2020 forum.*

Democrats agreed Friday that teachers should be paid more, public schools should get an influx of resources, and that Betsy DeVos is an awful education secretary.

One by one, 10 presidential candidates preached to the choir of educators at the National Education Association, the country's largest union, which is holding its annual assembly in Houston. (Most of the top-tier candidates were in attendance, though Pete Buttigieg and [Cory Booker](#) were absent.)

The NEA is optimistic that one of these Democrats will become president and usher in an administration far friendlier to teachers unions than Trump's — or Obama's. The NEA has called on education secretaries from two parties and two successive administrations, [DeVos](#) and [Arne Duncan](#), to resign.

But political winds have shifted in the union's direction, with teachers' strikes across the country drawing wide support and many Democratic voters and leaders [souring](#) on charter schools, most of which are not unionized. At the NEA's Strong Public Schools 2020 forum, candidates vying for the endorsement of the powerful union took questions from NEA President Lily Eskelsen García. And while the candidates agreed on a lot, there were a few standout moments.

Here are four takeaways from the event.

## **1. More candidates agreed: The next education secretary must be an educator.**

Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren promised a few months ago — prompted by a Brooklyn teacher — that her education secretary would be a public school teacher.

On Friday, a few more candidates followed her lead. Biden said appointing a teacher would be the first thing he did as president. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, too, said the next education secretary should be an educator, and touted his choice of longtime educators as city schools chancellors. (His predecessor, Michael Bloomberg, tapped non-educators for the role.)

California Senator Kamala Harris said the person she nominates “will be someone who comes from public schools,” and promised the audience of union members that they would “be at the table to help me make that decision.”

## 2. Despite recent national discussion, integration got scant attention.

A sharp exchange between Harris and former Vice President Joe Biden at last week’s debate brought fresh attention to the issue of school integration. The two candidates have faced questions about the government’s role in desegregating schools on the campaign trail all week.

But it didn’t come up at the NEA forum for either Harris — who has said she supports federal integration efforts, but been short on details — or Biden, who has endorsed federal grants to promote school diversity but said he still opposes court-ordered desegregation efforts.

Senator Bernie Sanders has offered the most detailed ideas for addressing school segregation.

In response to a question about inequality and segregation in schools, Julián Castro said that he had attended — and seen the consequences of — segregated schools, and that he would support efforts to address housing segregation and federal funds for “voluntary busing.”

“Today we’re still grappling with so many of the same issues that we were grappling with 30, 40, 50 years ago,” he said.

There were no other questions about segregation, though — perhaps reflecting the fact that the NEA has not itself prioritized the issue. Asked about segregation in May by Chalkbeat, Eskelsen García quickly pivoted to the issue of charter schools, which make up a minority of the country’s segregated schools.

### **3. De Blasio went all out against charter schools.**

De Blasio, who has garnered little support in recent polls, took an aggressive stance against charter schools, saying supporting them should be disqualifying for potential Democratic nominees.

“Too many Republicans, but also too many Democrats, have been cozy with the charter schools,” de Blasio said. “Let’s be blunt about it. We need to hold our own party accountable, too. And no one should ask for your support, or no one should be the Democratic nominee, unless they’re willing to stand up to Wall Street and the rich people behind the charter school movement once and for all.”

Moments earlier, he said, “I am sick and tired of these efforts to privatize public education. I know we’re not supposed to be saying ‘hate’ — our teachers taught us not to — but I hate the privatizers and I want to stop them.”

His comments stood out for their tone, even though some of his fellow candidates have also been critical of charters. Sanders, for one, reiterated his call to limit federal funding for charters during the NEA event, also invoking Wall Street.

Beto O’Rourke, the only other candidate who spoke about charters, took a more positive view, saying, “There is a place for public nonprofit charter schools, but private charter schools and voucher programs — not a single dime in my administration will go to them.

The remarks also trod familiar territory for the mayor, who notably once said that the head of New York City’s largest charter network, Eva Moskowitz, shouldn’t be “tolerated, enabled, supported.” But de Blasio has been less than

successful at turning that opposition into policy. De Blasio's desire to limit charters' access to space in public buildings led to state legislation that blocked him and costs the city millions every year.

## 4. Warren criticized high-stakes testing, despite clashing with unions on the issue previously.

Warren, the Massachusetts senator, disavowed “high-stakes testing” and recalled her time as a teacher of students with disabilities.

“This notion that it’s all about testing — that it’s all about what somebody far off in the state capital or far off in the national capital says, here’s what constitutes success and worse yet, here’s what constitutes failure — no, that’s not what education is about,” Warren said.

“Education is what goes on in the classroom; what a teacher has said is the goal. And when a kid gets there, it is a teacher who knows it. We do not need high-stakes testing.”

The comments appear to be a departure for Warren, who in 2015 pushed for the federal education law to include rules that would identify schools where certain subgroups of students had low test scores and hold them accountable for those results. That won the support of many civil rights groups but drew a sharp rebuke from teachers unions, including the NEA, which are more skeptical of the use of test score data.

Barbara Madeloni, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, wrote at the time: “In my conversation with Warren, her concern for traditionally underserved students, which is noble, was distorted by a seeming unwillingness to accept what so many teachers and parents are saying: that the use of testing for accountability is narrow-minded, undermines meaningful teaching and learning, and shifts the focus from the real issues our students and communities face.”

(Advocates like Warren argued then that their approach would mean extra resources for struggling schools and give local districts flexibility to decide how

to help them improve.)

Warren has not yet released a detailed K-12 education plan.

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