**By Linda Allewalt**

The Sentinel News - Wednesday, February 15, 2012 at 3:00 am *(Updated: February 15, 3:33 am)*

**State Rep. Brad Montell (R-Shelbyville) has introduced two bills to the Kentucky legislature that put forth very specific agendas concerning our public schools. One bill, BR116, has the catchy title of “The Great Schools Tax Credit Bill” and the other is BR117, a bill creating charter schools.**

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***Photo by Kentucky House Republican Caucus/LRC Public Information***

State Rep. Brad Montell (R-Shelbyville) listens Tuesday as Howard Fuller (left), director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning, testifies about charter schools to the House Education Committee in Frankfort. House Bill 77 sponsored by Montell seeks to allow charter schools in Kentucky. It was discussed but not voted on by the committee during its meeting.

The “Great Schools” bill would allow citizens of Kentucky to take tax monies that would have otherwise gone to the state coffers for schools and send them to an intermediary scholarship organization approved by the state. This includes sectarian religious schools.

Taxpayers are allowed to send up to $2,000, 90 percent of which must be distributed by the scholarship organization to the students who are approved for the program.

As Robert VerBruggen of *the National Review Online* writes,  “This isn’t a deduction: [the taxpayer] doesn’t merely pay ($2,000) less of his income. This isn’t a partial credit; his taxes are reduced by the full ($2,000). This is a dollar for dollar reimbursement by the government. There is absolutely no difference between this situation, and a situation in which the government simply gives ($2,000) to fund vouchers directly. Either way, the government has lost ($2,000) in tax revenue…”

I would call them vouchers in disguise.

Mostly likely the reason that this type of system was introduced is because school vouchers used for attendance to religious schools would violate our state Constitution’s prohibitions against public tax dollars being used for sectarian education.

One should be reminded here that private schools are not mandated to make provisions for children with disabilities, follow Title IX mandates or have any sort of board accountability to parents.  Also, the state of Arizona, where tax credits were instituted, saw nearly $350 million diverted from its tax revenue coffers, thus causing a huge depletion of funds for its public schools.

The charter school bill has the same effect on the tax dollars flowing away from public schools, but without the problem of violations of church/state (unless state oversight is so low that violations are slipped into the charter school curriculum).

Private corporations or other state approved groups are given a chunk of money out of the state public school budget to create schools that essentially have less regulation and oversight in turn for expected academic goals. This too is offered to low-income students, and there is no tuition involved.

The track record nationally for charter schools is mixed on student performance. A major study was done on schools in states where the charter system has been operating for several years, and it found that only 17 percent of students fared better than the public school students, 46 percent saw no difference, and 37 percent did more poorly.

If one spends the time to research narratives of charter school issues, corruption, quality of teachers and a whole host of other problems are apparent.

So why is Rep. Montell so keen on diverting tax funds from our public schools to set up these alternatives? Perhaps a clue comes from his membership (2011 list published by SourceWatch) in a national group with the acronym of ALEC, or the American Legislative Exchange Council.

This group is probably one of the most powerful groups in America and one that most of us have never heard about.  Rep. Montell is listed as being on ALEC’s Education Task Force committee.

What is ALEC? Simply put, it is an organization that allows corporations to advise, lobby and sway state legislators to introduce special-interest legislation that benefits their business and/or certain political goals.

It is funded by more than 300 major corporations, including AT&T, Kraft, Wal-Mart and State Farm. It also pulls funding from major foundations, like those set up by the Koch Bros., the Walton Family (Wal-Mart), the DeVos family (Amway) and the Coors Family. Legislators meet with these corporate entities to fashion model legislation to shape laws concerning education, the environment, consumer protection, workers’ rights, union issues, etc.  The bulk of the proposals are tied to conservative/right wing political opinions. One such model bill listed on ALEC’s Web site is called (surprise!) “The Great Schools Tax Credit Bill.”

A reading of this model bill and Rep. Montell’s bill shows them to be almost duplicates of each other.

Rep. Montell says on his Web site that his charter school bill is inspired by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. This group is funded heavily by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has its fingers in several educational initiative pies.

Bill Gates endorses a group that runs charter schools across the nation (for profit) called KIPP.  KIPP happened to be mentioned by former Louisville mayoral candidate Hal Heiner during his interview with *The Courier-Journal* about his charter-school advocacy group KARE (Kentuckians Advocating Reform in Education).

These types of groups are popping up in many states where the push is on for charter systems. The money behind these groups is most always traceable back to the same people that are funding ALEC.

They flood states with these little groups, which are intended to give the appearance of grassroots support for charter schools. As far as the voucher systems push, it is easy to see the religious groups behind that and easy to see why they lobby for them. As the economy has driven students away from sectarian schools, they face collapse without help from the taxpayers.

So what is the real reason that so many people of wealth and political power are investing millions, maybe billions of dollars to push these types of legislations within the states?

Is it really because they are concerned about low-income students or wishing to give public schools a prompt to compete and improve?

If that was so, then why not just give those billions directly to schools for infrastructure improvements or enhanced reading programs? How is drastically cutting the financial legs out from under our schools going to help them make needed changes?

The true reason is clear and has actually been discussed by many of these wealthy groups and political power brokers – they wish to completely revamp the American education system by privatizing it and making it a profit-driven system.

I find it somewhat amazing that politically conservative people who complain about the federal government making schools bend to “outside” regulations and complain about the use of tax dollars, are trying to apply models concocted by outside corporations onto state schools, and use state tax dollars to fund it all!

It’s the same thing with the sectarian religious organizations who don’t want their “religious freedom” to be hampered by the government, but have no problem taking government tax dollars to support their schools.

There are hundreds of models of successful public-school improvement programs all over this country. Why not import these ideas to help our schools, instead of allowing corporate America to apply its privatization and profit motive shackles on American education?

I think Rep. Montell should be asked these questions, and probably many more.

Linda Allewalt lives in Shelbyville.