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MADISON, Wis. — For charter school supporters, there were few better champions than Tony Bennett.

As Indiana's schools chief, he installed a school grading system that shortened the time it took to sweep aside a failing public school in favor of a charter. In Florida, he backed a bill — though unsuccessfully — that could have made it easier for parents to get charters in place at failing schools. He also pushed through a rules change that benefited both charter schools and traditional public schools by limiting how far any school's rating could drop in a single year.

Now, Bennett has them nervous.

Last week, Bennett resigned as Florida's education commissioner after The Associated Press uncovered emails detailing his efforts in Indiana to change the formula used to grade that state's schools to ensure a charter school he had held up as one of the state's best scored an "A."

For some charter supporters, who have looked to such state-administered grading systems as a way to prove their success, there is a fear the fallout could shake the public's confidence in an approach that already had plenty of skeptics. Perhaps as troubling is the idea Bennett might not be alone.

"I will bet you dollars to doughnuts that state chiefs and accountability directors have done this dozens of times," said Frederick Hess, director of education policy at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and a self-described Bennett admirer.

There have been several cases in recent years of teachers, principals and others being graded by state assessments finding illicit ways to improve their own scores, which are used to determine everything from school funding to bonuses for educators to whether a state can take over a school deemed to be failing. In March, for example, prosecutors in Atlanta indicted the city's former school superintendent and 34 others, accusing them of conspiring to cheat on standardized tests to boost student test scores.

But the Bennett case appears to be the first public revelation involving a state official who is doing the grading of schools. This week, Indiana's current schools chief put the release of this year's ratings on hold amid the discovery of what she termed additional "manipulation."

"It opens a window into a very real and significant problem for champions of education accountability," Hess said. "Part of the problem revealed in Indiana is we have very little insulation and very few safeguards in these systems. They've often been held together with duct tape and good-faith efforts rather than a careful, formal structure that's going to protect officials against both public pressure and the appearance of impropriety."

Russ Simnick ran a charter high school in Indianapolis from 2005 to 2008. Now senior director

for state advocacy for the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, Simnick said the Bennett affair could bolster the perception that charter school grades are vulnerable to political influence. But he said that's not what happened.

"He was not acting at the behest of the charter school community," Simnick said. "I think that's been missed in this whole story."

The first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1991 with a simple idea: give parents, teachers or others frustrated with their public schools a way to create independent schools with a specific set of goals, or a charter. Today, there are more than 6,000 charter schools in 42 states. They're open to all, free to attend and mostly paid for with public money.

They have fierce champions on both sides of the political aisle who see charters as a solution to public education troubles and are willing to spend millions to support their cause.

Charter school organizations, their employees or their families gave nearly \$2.3 million to state and federal political candidates between 1998 and the end of last year, according to the Sunlight Foundation, a government watchdog group.

The money is "not all bad, of course," said Thomas Gentzel, executive director of the National School Boards Association, which officially supports charter schools as long as local school boards authorize them and can revoke their charters. "But it certainly brings with it a lot of influence."

A Stanford University study of charters in 27 states released this year found a quarter outperformed traditional public schools in reading and 30 percent did so in math. But the report also cautioned that "worrying numbers" of charters did a lot worse than their local public schools.

While some of the political donations from those with ties to charter schools have gone to Democrats, more money has landed with Republicans — many of whom have embraced charters as a key component of their approach to public education. Republicans who control state legislatures in South Carolina, Missouri, Texas and Michigan all have voted in recent years to expand charter schools.

Christel DeHaan, who built a fortune in the resort industry, runs Christel House Academy, the Indianapolis charter school that initially scored a "C" last year on Indiana's "A-F" grading scale for schools. She has donated \$2.8 million to Republicans since 1998, including \$130,000 to Bennett, who has insisted politics played no role in the changes to the grading formula that ultimately led Christel House to score an "A."

Bennett's emails show he was invested in the school's success. Bennett switched Indiana to the "A-F" grading system and consistently cited Christel House as a top-performing school as he worked to secure support for his education agenda. Upon learning Christel House would receive a "C" last September, he wrote to his chief of staff, "They need to understand that anything less than an A for Christel House compromises all of our accountability work."

The state is "the true accountability entity to help people make more informed choices," said Bruce Baker, an education professor at Rutgers University who specializes in school finance

and charter schools. "But when state officials are taking an advocacy role, then their incentive is to game the grading system to make (charter schools) look like the better choice."

Critics of charter schools also worry about the potential financial incentives created by state-issued grades. Better ratings can attract more students to a charter school, leading to larger government payouts and fatter profits for charter school operators.

"Changing the grade is a very visible example of the influence that profit and money is having on this industry," said Alex Molnar, a professor of education policy at the University of Colorado. "It's a feature of charter school reform. It's not a bug. It's baked into the reform."

But Greg Richmond, president and CEO of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, cautioned against viewing Bennett's actions solely as a potential problem for charter schools. Instead, he said, it's a scandal that says more about problems with suspect state grading systems.

"What makes it important to the rest of the country are the bigger questions about these school accountability systems," Richmond said.

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