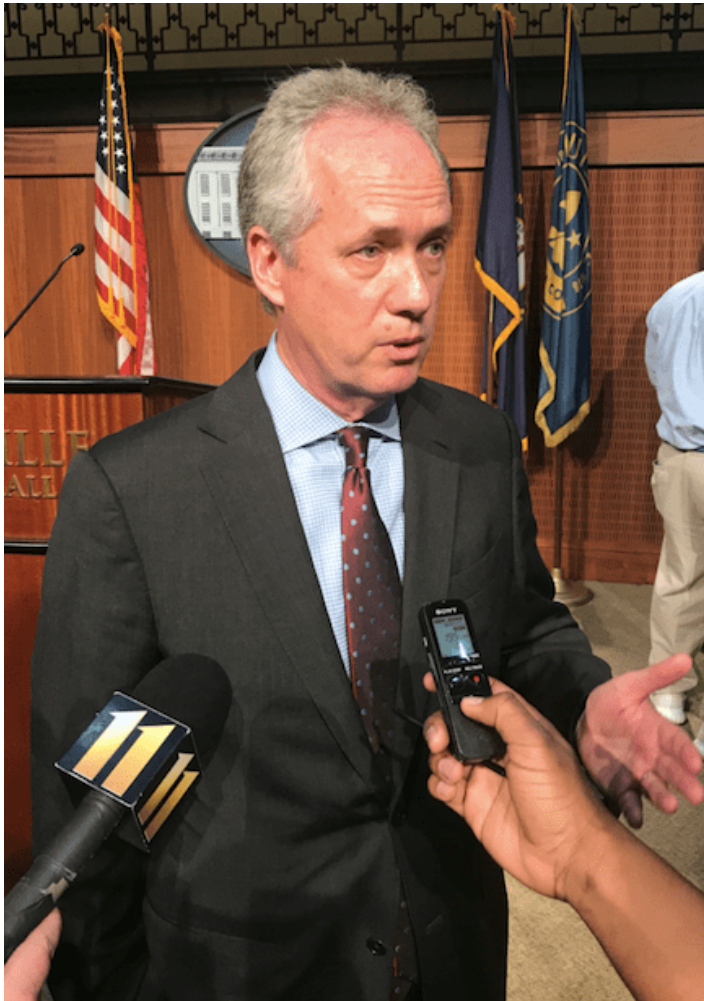


# SCALA members and family have contributed \$44,000 to Mayor Fischer's campaign since forming in July



Mayor Greg Fischer | Photo by Joe Sonka

Steering Committee for Action on Louisville's Agenda (SCALA) members and their close family members have contributed at least \$44,000 to the re-election campaign of Mayor Greg Fischer — who is a SCALA member — since the group formed last July, according to a search of the Kentucky Registry of

## Election Finance database.

These contributions include \$10,000 from the family of SCALA co-founder David Jones Sr. on two days in the months following the group's creation, including maximum \$2,000 contributions from Jones Sr., his wife, Betty, his son Daniel, his son and fellow SCALA member David Jones Jr., and Mary Gwen Wheeler, the wife of Jones Jr. and the chair of the Kentucky Board of Education.

[An Insider Louisville report last week](#) uncovered the existence of SCALA, an invitation-only group of leaders from businesses, nonprofits and religious organizations who have discussed topics such as public safety, air service and public K-12 education in Louisville.

While SCALA leaders viewed the organization as a way for the city's leaders to address serious problems, the group immediately faced criticism from members of the Jefferson County Board of Education and the Jefferson County Teachers Association, who regarded it as a secretive cabal of wealthy elites plotting to undermine the democratically elected school board.

Mayor Fischer initially refused to be interviewed by Insider about the then-unknown group, only issuing a statement through his spokeswoman that he meets with business leaders frequently on a range of topics. He also said that he views the current state audit of Jefferson County Public Schools, which could result in a state takeover or other strong intervention in JCPS, "with a businessman's view – as an opportunity to learn, grow and implement changes necessary for improvement."

Over the past week, Fischer has taken criticism [from officials in both parties](#) that he should have let the public know he was meeting with SCALA. Critics have included the Democratic Metro Council President David James, Republican Councilwoman Angela Leet, who is running against him for

mayor, and Ryan Fenwick, one of his Democratic primary opponents in the mayoral race.

While Fischer received \$44,000 from these individuals, Leet — who announced her campaign on Oct. 3 — only received one \$500 donation from a SCALA member in December, according to her quarterly KREF filing at the end of 2017.

Fischer dismissed this criticism last week, saying SCALA is “not a secret group of any kind” and that media were making too much out of the group.

On Thursday, Fischer told Insider that he has attended two SCALA meetings, including one where “I spoke about the need for more equity in schools in JCPS,” including the work of [Cradle to Career](#). He added that “I recall no discussion around the structure between the school board and the superintendent.”

Mayoral spokeswoman Jean Porter told Insider that she believes the mayor attended an introductory meeting of SCALA in June — before it registered with the Kentucky Secretary of State’s office — and then another in September, though she did not know the exact dates.

SCALA has been criticized for weighing in on potential major reforms to JCPS that could include a state takeover, despite having no representatives from JCPS or its constituency groups, such as Acting Superintendent Mary Pollio, teachers or board members. While SCALA has no administrators from local public K-12 and higher education, it does have significant representation from leaders and advocates for Catholic, religious and private schools.

Last year, SCALA members commissioned [a report by a national education consultant](#) with strong conservative ties, which determined that the JCPS board’s broad authority was a barrier to change. In addition to praising

several urban school districts that expanded charter schools as part of their reform efforts, one of the possible alternative governance models that Bellwether Education Partners raised would give the mayor the power to appoint school board members or the superintendent.

Asked if there was enough public input into the group, Fischer said that SCALA is “a group of community people” that is “coming together so that they can gather what their opinion is.”

“Public input’s always good,” said Fischer. “(SCALA) is not just business leaders... it’s business, it’s nonprofit, it’s faith leaders, so it’s good for people to come together and identify what the issues are in the community and how they can move forward.”

Fischer added that “more points of view” would be better, but SCALA members “don’t speak for the entire community, right? I mean, this is just a group that has their point of view that will be one of many points of view.”

### **SCALA helps to fill the coffers of Fischer’s re-election bid**

A month after SCALA first registered with the state as a nonprofit, its members and their close family members starting writing checks to the re-election campaign of Fischer.

On Aug. 17, Fischer received a maximum \$2,000 contribution from SCALA member Jim Patterson, the president of Louisville-based private investment firm Pattco LLC. Patterson is also the founding member and president of School Choice Scholarships, a leading nonprofit of Kentucky’s “school choice” movement advocating for private education. Patterson founded the group along with [George Fischer](#), the mayor’s father, who remains their director emeritus and a strong advocate of charter schools.

Fischer [faced criticism from two JCPS board members](#) last year when he came out in support of charter schools, following the Kentucky General Assembly's passage of a charter school bill that gave Fischer the authority as the mayor of Louisville to approve charter school applications, even if the school board opposed one.

Also on Aug. 17, Trilogy Health Services CEO Randy Bufford and his wife each donated \$2,000 to Fischer.

On Aug. 30, SCALA members Henry Heuser and Craig Jones, the CEOs of Unistar and Jones Plastic, donated \$1,000 to Fischer's campaign.

That same day, Humana founder Jones Sr. and venture capitalist Jones Jr. each contributed \$2,000 to Fischer.

In discussing SCALA with Insider, Jones Sr. called JCPS a "[miserable failure](#)" for not teaching enough kids to read and calculate, saying that it needs dramatic reform to move beyond the status quo. Jones Jr. was chairman of the JCPS school board until he was defeated in the 2016 election, telling Insider he believes the state should cease mandating that the school board micromanage the district, giving more power to the superintendent. Jones Sr. originally told Insider that Jones Jr.



David Jones Sr. | Courtesy of UofL

was the chair of SCALA's education subcommittee, but the group's leadership has since stated that it is chaired by Jim Lancaster.

Jones Sr. has also been the largest donor — at least \$275,000 — to the



[Bluegrass Fund PAC](#), which has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in recent JCPS school board elections to defeat candidates that were endorsed and financially supported by the teachers union.

On Sept. 26, the Fischer campaign received more maximum \$2,000 donations from members of the Jones family, including Jones Sr.'s wife, Betty, his son Daniel, and Mary Gwen Wheeler, who is the wife of Jones Jr. and serves as the executive director of 55,000 Degrees and the chair of the Kentucky Board of Education.

Insider asked Jones Sr. and Jones Jr. over email to share why they donated to Fischer's re-election campaign, but did not immediately receive a reply. Since Insider reported the initial SCALA story, Jones Jr. has not responded to multiple follow-up inquiries.

This same day in September, Fischer received \$1,000 contributions from the following SCALA members:

- Junior Bridgeman, of Bridgeman Companies, along with three family members each giving \$1,000
- Ed Glasscock, of Frost Brown Todd
- Jimmy Kirchdorfer, of ISCO Industries
- Pat Mulloy, of Elmcroft Senior Living
- Phoebe Wood, of CompaniesWood

Other members of SCALA who have donated to Fischer from August through last fall include Brown-Forman heir Christina Lee Brown (\$2,000); John Crockett of LG&E (\$500); Steve Gault, of Stephen C. Gault Co., (\$1,000); Brian Lavin, of NTS (\$1,000); John Moore, of Atria Senior Living (\$2,000); Mike Mountjoy, of Mountjoy Chilton Medley (\$500); and Steve Poe, of Poe Company (\$2,000).

While the contributions of SCALA members and their close family members to Fischer since last summer total \$44,000, these same individuals have given well over \$200,000 to Fischer when his previous two campaigns in 2010 and 2014 are included. Additionally, Brown and Jones Sr. donated \$35,000 and \$10,000 to his first inauguration.

Fischer first announced that he would run for a third term last March.

### **Campaign contributions ‘will never influence’ Fischer’s decisions**

Asked to comment about the contributions he received from SCALA members, a representative from his campaign replied in a statement that “campaign contributions have never and will never influence a decision Mayor Fischer makes. The mayor has extraordinary support of thousands of Louisvillians from every neighborhood and walk of life and will continue to work tirelessly on the behalf of all Louisvillians.”

Mayoral spokeswoman Porter told Insider that Fischer did not discuss with SCALA members the option of an alternative governance model for JCPS in which he could appoint the superintendent or board members, nor was he ever asked to keep the existence of SCALA a secret by its membership or leadership.

Asked if Fischer supports a state takeover of JCPS or a significant reduction in the power of the JCPS school board stemming from the state audit, Porter stated that the mayor “has already said that he does not support state takeover,” adding “we will have to wait for the audit to see what the next steps are.”

“As the Mayor has said before, he believes audits can be tools to make organizations stronger,” wrote Porter. “His interest is in making sure that all our children are getting the education they need to succeed.”

In his comments to Insider on Thursday, Fischer said that it was important for SCALA to understand the work that is already going on in the community as their members discuss education, again pointing to equity and his Cradle to Career lifelong learning initiative that includes the collaboration of Metro United Way, JCPS, 55,000 Degrees and KentuckianaWorks.

“You can talk about the school board, you can talk about the superintendent, and that’s all very important,” said Fischer. “But if our kids are showing up hungry, if our kids are showing up three years behind in kindergarten, our progress is going to be very limited, so that’s a point of view that I bring to that meeting.”

Fischer said SCALA members who lead for-profit organizations could wind up directing “more funding for nonprofit initiatives, more funding for education-related initiatives, violence-reduction initiatives,” as many of the city’s nonprofits are there “in one room where you can really advocate for what the community needs.”

Referring to SCALA’s subcommittee on air service in Louisville, Fischer added that he is “very involved in airlift,” as he appoints the majority of members to the airport authority and has heard from companies that decided not to locate in Louisville that direct flights to the West and East Coast are a necessity.

As for the [lack of diversity on SCALA](#), Fischer stated that “if the group stays to chief executives in the city, what that tells us is we need to redouble our efforts to have more diversity in chief executive positions in our city.”

He noted that Louisville is not alone in that current leadership of such business and groups “predominantly comes from older white guys, and that’s a challenge everybody recognizes... There is diversity in the group, but not enough.”



*Disclosure: David Jones Jr. and Mary Gwen Wheeler are major donors to the nonprofit Insider Media Group. SCALA member Ed Glasscock was an investor of the for-profit predecessor.*

*Caitlin Bowling contributed reporting.*